

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC: BEST XBOX GAME SINCE HALO?

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31
BRAND-NEW
REVIEWS

XBOX NATION INDEPENDENT XBOX MAGAZINE

WORLD EXCLUSIVE ACCESS AND INFO

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True Fantasy Live Online gets massively multiplayer on Xbox

Plus: **7** new online games you must play

FIRST LOOK

THE SIMS BUST OUT

Little computer people whiz on the rug, belch, and grab ass

FEATURE

WHERE IS RARE?

A special report on Microsoft's most elusive game developer

► **Tenchu on Xbox**
Cooperate with other like-minded ninjas on Xbox Live

► **Simpsons: Hit & Run**
Best. Simpsons. Game. Ever. Review on page 91.

► **Geometry Wars**
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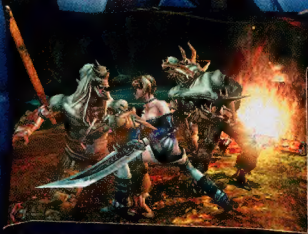
Official Xbox Magazine May, 2003

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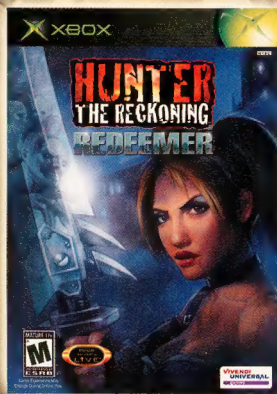


PlayStation 2

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Rare Where?

Microsoft paid \$375 million for developer Rare. Was it the sale of the century or did Microsoft buy the videogame equivalent of the Brooklyn Bridge? An in-depth investigation gets to the heart of the matter.



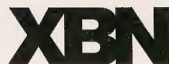
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Real Live Fantasies

Xbox Nation goes massively multiplayer with *True Fantasy Live Online*, a game that lets you live out your fondest wish: to play as a burly, potbellied, ascot-wearing adventurer.



Happy, Peppy Idiot Box Edition



Here come the Xbots...

Platform-defining titles have now become a discernible part of every videogame console's lifespan. They are the games that provide refined and generally more substantial interactive experiences than the rest of the lot. In the wider scheme of things, they represent the console's most significant contributions to the canon.

Atari 2600's evolution was characterized by *Pitfall* and *Pac-Man*. Nintendo 64 had *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* and *Goldeneye 007*. PlayStation 2's most sophisticated representatives, thus far, have been *Metal Gear Solid 2* and *Grand Theft Auto III*. For Xbox, Halo has long held the flag by its lonesome.

Enter *True Fantasy Live Online*, which brilliantly exemplifies the platform-defining Xbox title. *True Fantasy* is a new sort of multiplayer experience, in which character customization and real-time social interaction are given priority over combat and competition. If it lives up to its potential, it could very well change the face of console gaming as we know it.

This issue also features reviews of quite possibly the two finest Xbox games since Bungie's masterpiece: *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Soul Calibur II*. *Knights* is BioWare's first contribution to the Star Wars metaverse, and it's a significant one. Not only in size—this, after all, a deep, 40-hour experience—but also in bringing humanity to George Lucas' legend more elegantly than either of the series' recent films. The game has a strong story arc, superb atmosphere, and taps into videogaming's most intriguing potential: the ability to make one think not only about their actions within the context of a videogame, but also draw conclusions applicable to real life.

Equally significant is the finest Japanese videogame to grace Xbox since *Panzer Dragoon* or *Soul Calibur II* is the absurdly deep, layered sequel to what many had still considered the current state of the art. It improves upon the original in every way, providing the most elegantly crafted, infinitely playable fighter of this generation.

What's interesting is how well these two titles highlight the relative strengths and weaknesses of Western and Japanese game development. BioWare has for many years been a predominantly PC-focused studio, interested in emergent gameplay through deep, layered narratives and stats systems. *Knights* takes this concept and gives it a compelling context (the Star Wars universe) and nearly infinite choice for the player in terms of character customization and narrative. Namco's *Soul Calibur II* team takes many of these concepts and applies them to one-on-one combat; the emergent gameplay comes through enormous move palettes, which are blended to form an infinitely changing dance of death. One game has rough edges but pushes envelopes; the other provides a seamless experience, but one that is relatively light on innovation.

Things are looking up for Xbox. Even the damn *Simpsons* game is good—as sure a sign as any that *The Apocalypse of Joy* is nigh.

Evan Shamoon

Meet the team!



Evan Shamoon Evan and the Ape

When editor-turned-street mime Evan Shamoon inherits a 600-pound lowland gorilla, well, it's the start of a kooky friendship. Watch Evan as he makes performance art until the people throw eggs, and the ape as it flings its feces in random directions—it's the most fun you could have without the aid of the Funninator 8,340!



David Ziganay Dangerous Dave's Transformations!

When evil rears its stupid monkey-face, it's time for art director David Ziganay to get dangerous and his stuff to get busy with the transformations! Expect transformations, puffs of mysterious smoke, speed lines, and a heartwarming lesson to be learned at the end, like get stuff for Dave, or don't pick your nose so much, you stupid idiot.



Cindy Lum Manteca 95336

If you're not in Manteca, riding the waterslides and enjoying the Oakwood Lake Resort, cheating on your boyfriend—the hunky ex-model-turned-neurosurgeon, plotting revenge on your evil-twin sister from another mother, well, you just haven't lived. Tune in next week as former-beauty-queen-turned-President-of-the-United-States Cindy Lum gets bizz-zay.



Greg Orlando My Mom, The Mackerell!

He's a zany senior editor with a hook for a foot and a penchant for delightful wordplay. She's his mom, a real fish out of water—literally! And when Mr. Epstein, the nutty next-door neighbor unexpectedly stops by for dinner and the refrigerator is empty, well, what's a ne'er-do-well purveyor of plastic punnery to do?



Che Chou Chez Che

Wackiness hangs its hat at Chez Che, where the couch folds out into hilarity, the toilet flushes naught but yucks, and the fruit salad in the kitchen reeks of mirth. Good old Che has been spun off into another show, one about juggling lemurs. But boy! Is this editor's pad one madcap 700 square feet of side-splitting comedy!



Andrew Mendoza Uncle Andy's Juggtime Funtime

What do you get when you drop Andy Mendoza into a forest with well-meaning but incontinent moppets? You get Uncle Andy's Juggtime Funtime, that's what! Join Andy, Rod the melancholy lamppost, and Buddy the humpbacked squirrel for 30 minutes of hygienic fun that will learn you not to go potty wherever you damn well feel like it!



Chris Cruz Stop Whipping Me!

Prime time has never been so deliciously rib-tickling than with *Stop Whipping Me!*, a reality show starring plucky young art intern Chris Cruz and the heartless oversexer who whips him like a government mule when he brings back lunch without exactly 27 napkins and four ketchup packets or when he asks to leave work after only 62 hours.

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from conception to reality

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XPANSIV

Microsoft thinks outside the box

In small, careful steps, Microsoft is evolving the Xbox. The past two months have seen a number of interesting hardware and software announcements, ranging from a decision to team with chip maker ATI on Xbox 2 hardware, to the announcement of an Xbox-specific wireless network adapter. In the here and now, what this means for gamers is simple: The Xbox is no longer just a gaming console. From DVDs to MP3s, to Wi-Fi PC and Web connectivity, Microsoft aims for the Xbox to be an integral part of your household entertainment network. Expanding the box this generation also foreshadows what Microsoft will do in the next with Xbox 2—empowering the console with built-in PC link-up. Here's a rundown of the first-party goings-on that will soon dictate your gaming experience and, most likely, own your puny soul:

Wi-Fi Networking

Essentially, this adapter will allow users to remotely connect their Xbox to any wireless hub on a LAN (local-area network). Plug this small piece of hardware into an Xbox's Ethernet port and *voilà!*—instant wirelessly networked videogame console. This means no dragging long cables across the living room floor, and, more importantly, it will allow people to access their Xbox hard drive via their PC to transfer files, play MP3s, and whatever else Microsoft has in store. Specific pricing has not yet been announced, but this one will be out before year's end.



Live Now

Live Now provides what online communities require—specifically, a place where Xbox Live heads can hang out and talk with their friends/enemies before and after competing in various games. It is yet another way to facilitate the online experience, and also serves as something of a portal. Think "My Xbox Live," providing a window into all of the events taking place on the service each day from the moment you turn on your Xbox. If nothing else, think of this as a really cheap way to talk to your Xbox-owning friends long distance. Make the man work for you as you work for him!



Music Mixer

Having finally received a final version of the Xbox Music Mixer, one thing is abundantly clear: The folks at Microsoft wouldn't know "cool" if it shot them the face with a semi-automatic assault rifle. The presentation here borders on embarrassing: A series of corny MTV-on-Viagra style videos attempt to "get the blood pumpin'" for what is essentially a low-budget karaoke player. Would-be crooners can warble along to such megahits as "Auld Lang Syne" and Gloria Gaynor's "I Will Survive," and the Mixer will also remove vocal tracks from any song ripped from any CD so the musical possibilities are essentially infinite.

Yeah, it's fun—it's karaoke. But Microsoft's going to have to do a hell of a lot better than this if it hopes to ever steal a chunk of Sony's cultural clout.



Xbox 2 Developments

Graphics card manufacturer ATI will license graphics technology to Microsoft for the next version of the Xbox, Chris Evenden, an ATI spokesperson, said.

Microsoft and Nvidia have tussled over pricing issues since their initial agreement was signed in 2000, and an arbitrator was enlisted to hear a dispute over the price Microsoft pays for Nvidia's chips in 2002. They agreed to settle their differences in February, and talked of a future partnership to reduce Xbox costs. At one point, Nvidia was also left with a large amount of unusable inventory after Microsoft changed the security settings for Xbox, forcing Nvidia to absorb the cost. ATI will not carry inventory for Microsoft, Evenden said.

"By going for an intellectual property deal, Microsoft now has to get involved with the fabs and integrated circuit design," said Jon Peddie, principal analyst for Jon Peddie Research. "Although the company has had experience doing things like that with its WebTV box and its set-top box, they may or may not have a team in place ready to go quickly. Building and testing high-performance integrated



circuits at 0.13-microns or better is really tricky stuff."

ATI is the current market leader for PC-based graphics cards. Its 9800 Radeon card represents the top-of-the-line in terms of sheer graphics throughput and hardware effects, and it has been unanimously celebrated by such PC tech gurus as id's John Carmack and Valve's Gabe Newell.

Live Web

With potential as frightening as it is exciting, Live Web keeps Xbox users connected to their digital addiction at all times. Essentially, the service allows players stay connected with other Live players from any PC via the Web; to see which of friends are playing online; view stats and scoreboards, and generally monitor and customize their personal GamerTag. Live Web will offer "exciting content centered around music, celebrities and events"—whatever that means. Starting with *Ghost Recon Island Thunder* and all of the XSN Sports titles in September, gamers will be able to view their rankings at www.xbox.com/live.



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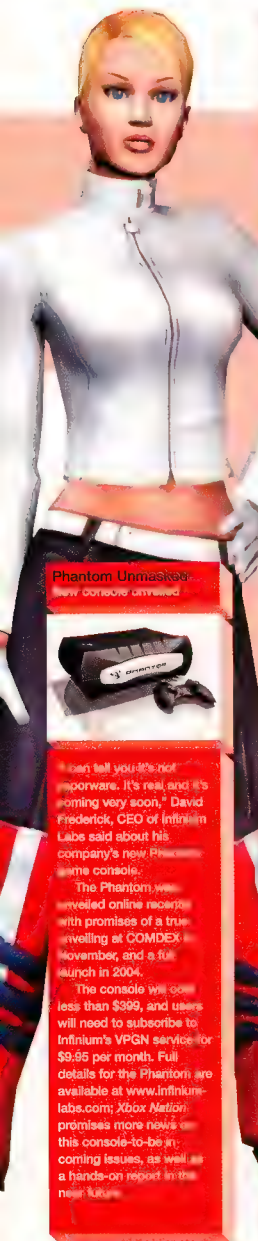
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ELECTRONIC AND ARTISTIC. NOT ONLINE.

Economics plays huge role in Electronic Arts' decision to shun Xbox Live

Anyone who's played *SOCOM: U.S. Navy Seals* for PlayStation 2 must concede that it offers a less secure and stable online environment than Xbox Live. But at least one heavy hitter still prefers Sony's online rigion to Microsoft's: Electronic Arts.

The announcement that EA Sports titles would be online exclusive to PS2 was a stunning rebuff for Microsoft, and the shockwaves were felt outside the gamer ghetto—the news broke on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*. It was a particularly surprising move since EA has a reputation for being determinedly console agnostic; after all, EA Sports is not only supporting Sony's online service, it's also signed up for Nintendo's strange "connectivity" initiative and is building Game Boy functionalities into its GameCube sports titles. So why is EA refusing to play ball with Xbox Live?

EA is a company that knows the value of brand awareness—hiring instantly recognizable people such as John Madden and Tiger Woods to embody its sports games is a major factor in its success. But Xbox Live is also a heavily branded experience, replete with obtrusive, glowing-green logos serving as a constant reminder as to which company is providing the online service. EA is reluctant to share the stage.

Eager to build its own online

empire, the company reportedly lost \$300 million trying to establish a foothold in the online market; titles such as *Sims Online*, *Majestic*, and *Earth and Beyond* have sold poorly. "EA made a large investment in its own server infrastructure, and it's sitting around underutilized," Dean Takahashi, author of *Opening the Xbox*, said. "So piggybacking on Xbox Live doesn't hold much interest."

There's an enormous moneymaking potential in online gaming, which is why Microsoft wants to control it so badly. In addition to subscription fees, online holds the promise of all sorts of new revenue streams. Whoever controls the service can collect valuable customer data, peddle expansions, offer upgrades, and even auction off in-game advertising space. But as Luc Vanhal, president of Vivendi Universal in the United States, told Reuters news agency, "Why should I be handing that asset over to Microsoft,



Electronic Arts seems to be in the driver's seat in terms of its negotiations with Microsoft.

against Microsoft. Formerly, EA was paying AOL to have its content featured on AOL's game site. Now, AOL, recognizing EA's clout, will be paying EA \$27.5 million for the rights to host the company's games on its sites, CNET.com reported.

This puts Microsoft in a strange and unfamiliar position. The Redmond behemoth didn't become the biggest

In the console world, a company such as EA has as much—or more—clout than newcomer Microsoft.

with nothing in exchange for it?"

Ultimately, it may be a matter of need. "It makes a lot of sense for a small company like THQ to sign on—[it] can't build [its] own online service," Takahashi said. But any company that can afford to go it alone may be increasingly wary of handing over the reins to Microsoft. A recent deal EA struck with AOL bolsters the game company's position

software company on Earth by being a team player. It is used to dictating terms. But in the console-game world, a company such as EA—which sells more Xbox games than any other publisher—easily has as much clout as newcomer Microsoft. In a recent meeting with Xbox Nation, Microsoft's Ed Fries said he expects this situation to be resolved in short order. Time shall certainly tell.

Phantom Unmasked: New console unveiled



Can tell you it's not a toy. It's real, and it's coming very soon," David Frederick, CEO of Infiniti Labs said about his company's new Phantom game console.

The Phantom is unveiled online receiving with promises of a true rivaling at COMDEX November, and a full launch in 2004.

The console will cost less than \$399, and users will need to subscribe to Infiniti's VPGN service for \$9.95 per month. Full details for the Phantom are available at www.infinitilabs.com. Xbox Nation promises more news on this console-to-be in coming issues, as well as a hands-on report in the near future.

Star Trek

Activision said Viacom, claiming it did not properly control its Star Trek franchise, thus reducing the value of Activision's games in make Star Trek videogames.

Diffuser gets its Xbox on

Check out Diffuser's video for "Get It On." The video features videogame footage of *Outlaw Volleyball*. <http://ftp.saltinteractive.com>. http://diffuser/diffuser_music_video.mpg

Justice, Xbox style

Superman and other DC Comics heroes are coming to Xbox in 2004 when Midway releases *Justice League*, an action game based on the Cartoon Network animated show.



Out of Myth

Comes Mayhem

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Fantasy Violence



Otogi
Myth of Demons

SEGA

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TOKYO TRIBE

The Matrix Final takes Tokyo. Welcome to the desert of the real.

Posted to <http://www.2ch.net/>

1 : Keanu2 *ITcz0s/.cs :
03/06/07 19:51 ID:RBEJ7IH1

Tomorrow, June 8

At 10:00 AM, I, dressed as Neo, will make a mad dash for the payphone by the police station at Hachiko-mae in order to get back to the real world. I'd like for everyone to put on a suit, play the part of the agents and try to stop me. If I make it to the phone booth, I win.

For the Japanese, fandom is a way of life. In the movie *High Fidelity*, John Cusack's character opines, "What really matters is what you like, not what you're like." In Japanese culture, a hobby isn't something you do so much as who you are; interests play a commanding role in defining one's self-image. And hardcore hobbies aren't just limited to nerds either. It isn't uncommon for ordinary salarymen to be terrifyingly obsessive about golf, K-1 kickboxing championships, pachinko, or fishing lures. The Japanese word *otaku* frequently translated into English as *geek* or *enthusiast*, literally means *home*—as in, "one who never leaves home."

Recently, a group of Japanese *Matrix* enthusiasts left their Tokyo homes en masse. The above message-board post was made on June 7 to Japan's largest message-board community, *2channel* (often abbreviated to *2ch*). By itself, the post is fairly meaningless; *2ch* is a gargantuan site with a deafening signal-to-noise ratio. The site is infamous for being "difficult for people who can't tell when a lie is a lie." Somewhat surprisingly, this post was not a lie.

On June 8, a man dressed as Neo showed up at

the intersection at 10:00 a.m., as promised. Even more surprisingly, a dozen people donned black suits and chased him as Agent Smiths. The brief scenario was captured by a grainy traffic-intersection Webcam. The "off"—an offline meeting of online acquaintances—was a success.

Japanese *Matrix* fans went nuts: It's one thing to joke about recreating a scene from one's favorite movie, but it's another thing entirely to actually follow through with it. The doubting *2ch* denizens who laughed off the initial message were now hastily backpedaling, asking if anyone was interesting in giving it another go.

"*Matrix* in Tokyo Final" happened on June 29, and this time, the number of people involved was staggering: "cast members" portraying all of the film's major characters were backed up by over 250 Agent Smiths. Also on hand were dozens of photographers and cinematographers to document the event, as well as a battalion of "support staff" to guide participants, direct scenarios, provide cold drinks and medical assistance, and sweet talk the inevitably concerned police officers. A few hundred nonparticipating spectators also followed the clan throughout the day.

How was this community formed?

The Japanese perception of the associated film no doubt helped. There's no hotter property in this country; the opening of *The Matrix Reloaded* broke all sorts of domestic box-office records. Another likely explanation is the phenomenon described by social theorist Howard Rheingold as a "smart mob." Smart mobs are ad hoc, temporary associations of like-minded individuals brought together through the synchronized, large-scale use of communication and computing technologies. A smart mob is more than just a large group of people; the group works together as a single entity to rapidly effect change



beyond the abilities of any single individual. Famous examples of effective smart mobs are the 1999 anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle, and the toppling of President Estrada by millions of concerned—and connected—Filipinos. Recently, examples of flash mob events have occurred in New York and San Francisco, with successful results.

While smart mobs dissipate once their raison d'être has been fulfilled, the *Matrix* "mob" has only continued to grow over the course of several weeks. I attended the *Matrix* in Tokyo Final and was pleasantly surprised by the general vibe of the event. People weren't nervous or self-conscious; it was as if the ego had retreated into some greater collective. Everyone got along swimmingly from the get-go. The attendants were hoping to participate in an event that was, by virtue of pure numbers, something bigger than themselves. Like a meeting of Friendster.com users, it was a social excuse to make contact and keep in virtual touch thereafter. It started on a whim as a smart mob, but somewhere along the way turned into a community. Why?



The answer lies in Cusack's aforementioned observation. Shared interests let people quickly form strong friendships. Such behavior isn't superficial—rather, it's superpractical and supersensible. People with shared interests can find a way to parlay those interests into building a highly effective social network. Because the benefits of such a large-scale network far outweigh what is possible in a smaller group, people will generally be friendly towards one another and respect the unwritten rules of social behavior.

This *Matrix* community example is relevant to Xbox in Japan for two reasons. First, it shows that if Microsoft can tap into the rabid fandom that exists in Japan, there's no reason why Xbox *otaku*s wouldn't also coexist among the Japanese Airsoft gun freaks, and the salarymen golf nerds. Secondly, communities are the backbone of Xbox Live. Of course, price point, marketing, and supported software have all been important factors in Live's success. But like all organizations, it's the people behind the headsets that make Live what it is today. Because of them, Xbox Live is



more than just a service, it's an online community constructed around shared interests.

The adoption rate for Xbox Live has been far higher than Microsoft projected, and shows no signs of slowing anytime soon. The *Matrix* flash mob proves that there's a restless nation of *otaku*s waiting to be tapped by Microsoft, provided that its recently reorganized Japanese branch gets its act together.

That's why the flash mobs prove that there's a nation of otaku's waiting to be tapped by Microsoft.

What the company chooses to announce at September's Tokyo Game Show 2003, will be a telling sign as to the changes in store for Xbox in Japan. (Rumor has it that Microsoft will unveil a slimmed down, redesigned version of the current Xbox hardware, among other renovations).

The Tokyo *Matrix* offline event could only have



happened in Japan; the tight-knit culture and geographically concentrated population make offline meetings feasible in a way that could never be duplicated in countries which are less wired, and less dense. The same principles apply equally well to online gaming.

Microsoft seems to have understood this fundamental truth when designing Xbox Live, and games

such as *True Fantasy Live Online* (see "Real Life Fantasies," page 44) will only strengthen the social potential. And who knows, maybe the evolution of smart mobs will eventually take the phenomenon online, where hundreds of like-minded *otaku*s congregate on a collective whim via Xbox Live?

On the DL

the latest live downloads

- **Brute Force:** Brand-new single and multiplayer missions. Also two deathmatch maps (Prisoner's Lament, Cerulean) and one new campaign (Lockjaw).
- **High Heat Major League Baseball 2004:** Latest roster update May 2003.
- **Inside Pitch 2003:** Jester Field available for download.
- **MechAssault:** Five new maps and four new mechs, an interface update, two more mechs, and the addition of Capture the Flag mode, Scout, Team Scout, Skirmish, Team Skirmish, and Giant Killers modes.
- **NBA 2K3:** Roster updates were released, in November 2002 and January, February, and April 2003.
- **NFL 2K3:** Roster updates came in December 2002 and January 2003.
- **NFL Fever 2003:** First roster update available.
- **Phantasy Star Online Versions I & II:** Three downloadable battles and four challenges posted.
- **Return to Castle Wolfenstein:** Three new multiplayer maps now available, with Chateau released in August.
- **Run Like Hell:** Additional skins and minigames currently available for download, more content coming.
- **Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix:** Five new downloadable multi-player maps.
- **Star Wars: The Clone Wars:** New maps including Kashyyk Conquest and Raxus Control Zone.
- **Splinter Cell:** The famous Kola Cell extra mission now available.
- **Toejam & Earl 3:** Three new characters and two new levels posted.
- **Unreal Championship:** Three new deathmatch maps and one GTF level.



BOLL SHIDDIN'

House of the Dead director Uwe Boll goes hands-on with Xbox Nation

German director Uwe Boll knows how important it is to take an active role in the undead. During the San Francisco screening for his new movie *House of the Dead*, Boll took to frisking people as they walked in the door, patting them down to make sure no one entered with a camera. The director spoke with *Xbox Nation* in between takes on his new movie, an adaptation of *Alone in the Dark* starring Christian Slater and Tara Reid.

Xbox Nation: So... is *House of the Dead* a horror film or an action film?

Uwe Boll: I think it's a horror-action film. Or an action-horror film, you can turn it both ways. I think we have some creepy moments, like when a young woman is in the water, or when there's a girl alone in a house and she's attacked by a zombie, but [we also] have a lot of action going on, and this is where my idea was to really show this is a videogame-based movie. It's not a movie like *Nightmare on Elm Street*, or *Halloween* or something, where you're building up lots of suspense. We have a war going on in our movie, it's not a slasher movie.

XBN: What's the biggest gross-out sequence in the film?

Boll: One of our lead actresses tries to escape into a house through a side

window, and various zombies are attacking her, ripping and cutting her legs off. It's all happening on-screen. She's lifted up, by the hero of the movie, into the room, but nothing below the waist is left of her. She's bleeding all over the place. It's really brutal.

XBN: The nudity in the film...do you think that's an important part of drawing the audience in?

Boll: I think maybe because I'm from Europe, I'm not so scared of showing some nudity, topless women. For me it's not the question of [whether or not] I have to put naked girls in the movie, it's more the question [would it make sense] for them to have a top on, or a bra? For example, if a girl goes with her boyfriend swimming in the ocean, she would go topless if nobody else was there? In Europe, there's no problem getting a PG-13 with topless women. So, it's only tricky in America, I think.

XBN: What were shooting days like?

Boll: When the sun went down we started shooting—that was usually around 8:00 p.m. And before that we'd rehearse for about three hours. When the sun came up, we would wrap for the day. So we'd get home around 7:00 a.m., sleep till about 1:00 p.m., and then at 5:00 p.m. [the producers] would pick

everyone up and take them to the set for another day of shooting.

XBN: What do you think has been the best videogame movie?

Boll: I hope its [this one], to be honest. That's the reason I did it. But there are a lot of bad movies made from games, like *Mortal Kombat*. I didn't like *Street Fighter*, I didn't like *Wing Commander*... suppose I liked *Resident Evil*. I'm not a big fan of *Lara Croft*; the movie is big, there's a lot of CGI in it, but I don't like movies where no one gets hurt. You know that Angelina Jolie will never die. I like surprising elements.

XBN: Can you tell us a little about the upcoming *Alone in the Dark* movie?

Boll: The fifth *Alone* game comes out the same time as the movie. What I don't want is [a piece of synergy] like *Enter the Matrix*, where you have the same story and locations in the movie and in the game. [Instead] I think you should take the main idea of a game and create a great movie, as opposed to rebuilding a game into a movie, where you use the same story. That's how we handle *Alone in the Dark*. It's full of question marks and miracles. Our paranormal investigator, Edward Canby, must find a lot of keys and clear a lot of situations. And there's a lot of action in the film.

XIII, Part I

X-Files: David Duchovny has signed to voice the lead in Upi Soft's FPS *XIII*. "XIII isn't like any videogame I have ever seen," Duchovny said. "Players are in for a lot of surprises."

XIII, Part II

Adam "Batman" West has also been added to the cast of voice actors in *XIII*. West, known for his campy turn as the Caped Crusader, lends his vocals to General Gerrington.

SNK = AOK

SNK has risen from the ashes of bankruptcy. Under its new name SNK Playmore, the company plans to release new versions of well-loved titles *Metal Slug* and *King of Fighters*.

FORGOTTEN REALMS

Baldur's Gate

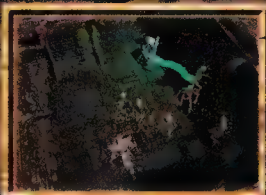
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Violence



PlayStation 2

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GAMEPAD

How videogames will change the world, part one.

Words : Evan Shamoon Illustration : Mike Miller

Soldiers use military sims and first-person shooters to hone their battlefield awareness and hand-eye coordination. Indy-car drivers use racing titles to develop their handling skills and engine management. Pilots have trained on *Flight Simulator* for decades. For these specialists, the transition is a literal one, as they borrow skills from a virtual reality and make use of them in the physical. Is it not, then, logical to think that we are all trained by the games we play?

A recent study of young adults, published several months ago in *Nature*, found that those who play videogames show better visual acuity than those who don't. Among other things, they kept better track of objects appearing simultaneously in their field of view, and processed rapidly changing visual information more efficiently. It is significant to note the researchers ruled out the possibility that visually adept people are drawn to videogames in the first place; those who didn't normally play games were trained to play them, and showed appreciably better visual aptitude after

the fact. The team said that 10 hours with Electronic Art's *Medal of Honor* was enough to improve an entire range of visual skills.

There are many who cite realistic racers such as *Gran Turismo* and *Sega GT* as having helped them avoid car accidents. Even more note tangible improvements in their real-life basketball/golf/skateboarding skills after many hours spent playing the digital renditions thereof. Chances are, those weaned on first-person wargames would be more likely to notice a woman opening her office window four stories above them as they walk down the street. But how does a lifetime of playing *Super Mario Brothers* sequels affect our visual and observational aptitude? Does playing videogames—"shudder"—actually make us smarter?

Even the most "realistic" videogames involve a process of mental translation—a necessary reliance on our understanding of symbol and language, quite unfamiliar to our primary reality. As we play, we are forced to grapple with representative objects and situations on

the fly, often at a very fast pace.

It has been argued that by forcing a constant conscious interpretation of the data we receive, videogames create a link between our symbol-understanding mind and our subconscious. In any context, this is a state not easily reached: While playing games, people often exhibit signs of catatonia, including slackened facial muscles, glazed and fixed vision, and a difficulty responding to their environment. Aside from a drug- or meditation-induced trance, how many other activities

which allows people to access and inform their musical right-brains in the context of a 3D space shooter, to Blizzard's *WarCraft III*, perhaps the most remarkable exercise in left-brain organization and resource management ever conceived, the active process of interacting with a dense, systematic computer program is one that engages the mind on many levels. There's something deeply satisfying about walking into a games shop and watching an Ivy League-educated adult look on in awe as a 12-year-old kid effort-

Videogames create a link between our symbol-understanding mind and our subconscious.

regularly elicit this response? The answer: not many.

Though their subject matter often fails to communicate it, videogames hold limitless potential for high-level, multiple-sensory learning. From Sega's experiment in music creation, *Rez*,

lessly deciphers the rules, systems, and means of interacting with the game demo kiosk in front of him. Videogames as the ultimate populist educational tool, the best option our society has to even out its centuries-old imbalance of knowledge and power? Hell yeah.



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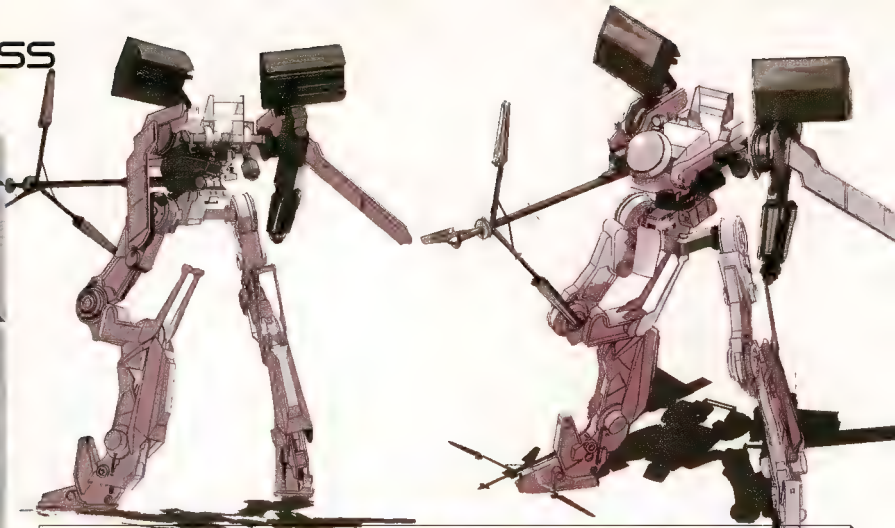
Air Force Loves X Pilots go online with Live



Military news publication *Stars and Stripes* reported that U.S. Air Forces stationed in Europe have allocated \$200,000 to build 17 Xbox Live-enabled gaming centers at 14 bases across the European continent. Each base will receive between \$7,500 and \$20,000 to spec out a game center of its choice. According to the article, the reason for such a substantial investment in these game centers is because the Air Force believes online gaming, particularly the headset-wearing, trash-talking Xbox Live variety, brings servicemen throughout the region together and forms virtual camaraderie during downtime.

Ian Foster, the base community director for Lajes Field in the Azores islands, told *Stars and Stripes* that while the game centers are free of charge to airmen, time limits will be imposed. "There will probably be a wait the first day," Foster said. "A lot of people are asking for it." The pilots over at Lajes have even painted their game center black and green to reflect the system colors of the Xbox.

Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany was the first to host an Xbox Live game center last April. *Stars and Stripes* reports that the rest of the centers across Europe will go online by the end of the fiscal year.



STEEL BATTALION MAKES CONTACT

Capcom forges ahead with an online update for the most expensive game ever

By all rights, *Steel Battalion* shouldn't even exist. Packaged with a massive 40 button dashboard controller, and retailing at \$200, the super-niche project was commercial suicide from the get-go. Yet, thousands, if not tens-of-thousands, actually bought the game, which had a limited production run. This winter, Capcom plans to capitalize and grow its mech-loving install base by releasing

Steel Battalion: Line of Contact, an online sequel to last year's behemoth.

"We aren't going for just a simple graphical upgrade this time," Atsushi Inaba, the game's producer and visionary said. "Instead we're focusing on creating new graphics, albeit based on the old design."

In doing so, Inaba and his team have created a war-torn world rich with entirely new environments—virtual battle-

fields for players to congregate via Xbox Live. "You can have anything from 3-on-3 battles to a 5-on-5 match," he said. "Throughout the course of the game, players will partake in critical key missions that will have a huge overall impact on the war." Key to the success of this persistent online war is using the radio. "Players can eavesdrop on enemy communications to their advantage and win battles." Uh, wow

GET OWNED BY THE MINIBOSSES

Imagine the *Castlevania* theme song as reinterpreted by Black Sabbath



"[Game soundtracks] have gone away from riffage," Aaron Burke, guitarist for the Minibosses said. "Now it's either ambient sh't or real songs from two bit 'punk' acts. F'ck that." Burke expressed a sentiment shared by the members of Minibosses, an instrumental rock quartet who cover soundtracks from old-school Nintendo 8-bit games.

Group members began playing after moving from their home town of Boston, MA, in early 2000. They play classic gaming soundtracks because they're exercises in overcoming limita-

tions. "The composers were extremely limited in what they could work with," Burke said. "Writing a song that had to repeat every 30 seconds and not get f'cking old quick is a challenge in itself—plus they were restricted by the hardware." And they're all about imposing the same restrictions on Minibosses' covers. Songs from *Metroid* and *Contra* are played with the same sequenced precision as their predecessors, only with a sparseness and space that lends importance to each instrument. Check out the band's Web site at: www.minibosses.com.

Larry The Looter Lives

Sharp-eyed *Simpsons* fans will note the arcade game *Larry The Looter* is included in *The Simpsons Hit & Run*. In *Looter*, players take the role of Larry before he gets shot dead.

Escape to Xbox

Namco has plans to make games for Xbox based on John Carpenter's *Snake Plissken*, the beloved icon who escaped from both New York and Los Angeles in two separate films.

BioWare's New RPG!

Sadly, Microsoft would rip out *Xbox Nation's* collective tongue if it spilled the beans on BioWare's new Xbox RPG. Expect Microsoft to unveil said game at the Tokyo Game Show.

WWW.NAMCO.COM

[illegible]

The logo for the video game Soul Calibur II. The text "SOUL CALIBUR" is rendered in a stylized, metallic, gothic-style font. The letter "C" in "CALIBUR" is significantly larger and features a circular design with a sword hilt in the center. Below the "C" is a large Roman numeral "II". The entire logo has a metallic, three-dimensional appearance with highlights and shadows.



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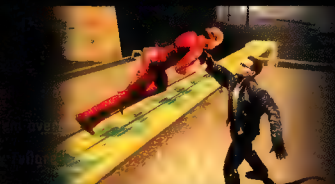
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Microsoft gets High



Microsoft recently announced it bought the rights to 3DO's *High Heat* baseball game. According to Reuters, the company acquired the rights at 3DO's bankruptcy auction held in San Francisco on Aug. 14. No price was given for the purchase, Reuters said.

It's uncertain how *High Heat* fits into Microsoft's plans. Microsoft already has its own baseball game series *Inside Pitch*, but it's commonly believed *Heat* is superior. If Microsoft chooses to keep *Heat* intact, Reuters said, it will still need to buy the license to use real baseball players and stadiums from Major League Baseball.

Microsoft and other game companies had the option of bidding on all of 3DO's assets, but none chose to do so, Reuters said. Instead, individual games were sold off piecemeal with Eutech's *Street Racing Syndicate* being purchased by Namco for approximately \$1.5 million and Ubi Soft walking away with the *Heroes of Might and Magic* games for \$1.3 million. As of press time, it was uncertain as to whether other 3DO properties, most notably the gore-filled *Four Horseman of the Apocalypse* or the much-maligned *Army Men* series were acquired by any bidder.

Game company 3DO filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy on May 28, prompting the auction. 3DO had struggled with weak sales for years, and was only kept afloat through enormous cash infusions by its president and founder Trip Hawkins.

NEEDS NO MORE

Study shows students like games, and maybe beer

The myth of the gamer as a young, geeky, socially stunted loner has been momentarily dispelled by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. According to its report, 65 percent of American college students identify themselves as regular or occasional game players, with 20 percent of those claiming to be regular gamers who claimed gaming had social benefits.

Students from 27 colleges and universities were polled in 2002 to learn more about the relationship between college students, videogames, and how game playing affected other areas of their lives.

Sixty percent played videogames to help pass time while they were alone. Other findings noted 32 percent of students admitting to playing games during class, and 48 percent reporting that games occasionally got in the way of studying.



Xbox's James Xbond

Shannon Elizabeth will be lending her voice and appearance to the videogame version of *James Bond 007: Everything or Nothing*. Her game debut arrives on Xbox this fall.

OTOGI: THE ART OF MYTHS

Otogi's producer Rintaro Yamada sounds off on visual design

The world of *Otogi* (see the review, page 86) is the stuff of lucid dreams. Demons haunt abandoned temples beneath a metallic sky; shapeless evil swirl en masse; it's one of the most imaginative domains seen in gaming since Sega's *Panzer Dragoon Orta*.

Xbox Nation recently caught up with the game's producer, Rintaro Yamada, to rap about Western vs. Eastern art.

Xbox Nation: *Otogi* is visually fantastic and looks very Japanese. What historical era inspired you?
Rintaro Yamada: The world of *Otogi* is based on the Heian Period. In Japanese history, this period was an especially colorful and glamorous era centering on the aristocracy.

XBN: If you could describe *Otogi*'s visual look in just one word, what would it be?
Yamada: If I described it in one word, it would be *youden* ("uncanny and alluring"). This is a rather difficult word to illustrate, since you must visualize an image that is both scary and attractive.

XBN: What do you think is the main difference between Western and Eastern character designs?

Yamada: There are many differences, the biggest being the use of color. In Western countries, primary colors are used a lot; and in Asian countries, neutral colors are used more abundantly. The common explanation is that these differences are influenced by cultures and genetics, but I believe there are designs that exist which rise above being considered either from the West or the East. For instance, the characters Disney created are popular in both the West and East, and they are the ones I find artistically attractive.

XBN: What were some of the influences that helped shape the look for *Otogi*'s main character Raiko?

Yamada: Japanese samurai and the medieval knights of Europe influenced the appearance of Raiko. Our intent was to develop a unique and attractive superhuman character, so we created him as a Japanese samurai fused with the powerful and gorgeous knights who appear in the fantasy world of medieval Europe.

Sega: Not Half Bad!

Electronic Gaming Business reported that although Sega reported a profit last year, half of the company's 106 titles released in 2002 lost money.

Grand Theft What?

Now coming to a potato house near you: *Grand Theft Auto* starring Wendy Knight. The film, according to its creators, has nothing whatsoever to do with the Rockstar videogame.

This is where
I left Kate, Lucy and Michelle
begging for more.

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New Identity for Xbox Microsoft's other MMORPG



While information is scarce regarding Micro Forté's upcoming MMORPG, some details are finally leaking out. The game can support hundreds of thousands of players using the company's proprietary (and Australian government-funded) BigWorld technology, and it is tentatively titled *Identity Zero*. "Our team is hard at work making a game that will change the way people think about Xbox, online games, and massively multiplayer RPGs," a Micro Forté representative said.

Xbox Platinum Hits Good games for 20 bucks



In the spirit of saving money and playing videogames, *Xbox Nation* presents the newest additions to Xbox's ever-growing list of \$20 videogame bargains:

- *Blinx: The Time Sweeper*
- *Dead or Alive 3*
- *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin*
- *James Bond: Nightfire*
- *Medal of Honor: Frontline*
- *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit 2*
- *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4*
- *Unreal Championship*

Some other highlights out of the 29 total games on the list, for those who haven't been keeping score at home, include *Max Payne*, *Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee*, *Silent Hill 2: Restless Dreams*, *SSX: Tricky*, *Amped*, and *Wreckless*.

Photo by John Ulan

BOOGIE KNIGHTS

Catching up with BioWare on the Force, life, and racism in *Knights of the Old Republic*

Upon its release in late July, LucasArts and BioWare's Star Wars: *Knights of the Old Republic* immediately became the best-selling Xbox game of all time, selling a whopping 250,000 copies in its first four days.

Given the depth and moral decision-making possibilities that BioWare has infused into the typically cookie-cutter Star Wars universe, *Xbox Nation* decided to get deep with the studio's co-CEOs Ray Muzyka and Greg Zeschuk.

***Xbox Nation: Knights* appears to consistently confront racial issues in the Star Wars universe. For example, nonhumans are non grats on the top level of Tatooine, and slavery and racism are central issues the player confronts on the wookiee world Kashyyyk. Is this intentional social commentary?**

Ray Muzyka: It's subtle, but it's there. Honestly, it's more of an intentional dilemma than a social commentary. We wanted to force gamers to begin making light/dark decisions as soon as the game started. We also wanted to do mature themes that were appropriate for a teen audience, but proved thought provoking for everyone. So right off the bat, we decided to immerse the player in fairly deep moral decision-making.

Greg Zeschuk: We also have our own

personal values and commentary that exist within *KOTOR*. For example, one of our subtle underlying goals is to show that games are a viable medium.

Muzyka: An art form...

Zeschuk: Right. So that's kind of our underlying commentary. But the good-and-evil choices are definitely a lens that everything in the game gets focused through.

XBN: Do the light-and-dark paths reflect your notions of the effect our daily decisions have on our moral compass?

Zeschuk: Not necessarily. But it's interesting—early on, we made a conscious decision that every single conversation in the game [*KOTOR* has over 14,000 lines of dialogue] had to have valid choices: good, neutral, evil, and sometimes funny. But what we found was really interesting: The assembly of all these lines became greater than the sum of the parts. The world—as well as the light-and-dark themes—really came alive through all these character relationships.

Muzyka: Yeah, it's an emergent design that we didn't necessarily intend on.

XBN: Are you playing as dark or light characters?

Muzyka: I've mostly played as light characters, but I recently started playing the dark side. It's something else. I had

this moment where I recovered an item for a widow but instead of returning it to her, I sold it and kept the money, basically dooming her and her family to a life of poverty. That was pretty powerful, and had an emotional effect on me.

XBN: What's your favorite moment in the game?

Muzyka: We don't want to give away the plot, but there are several twists in the game that we're proud of. And the major twist—it comes out of nowhere—is the most elegant we've ever created. You know those rare moments in gaming where you get a chill down your spine? I think we've created one of those here.

XBN: You guys must be feeling pretty proud these days.

Muzyka: We are proud, and we definitely have that warm, fuzzy feeling. But we don't tend to dwell on our successes. There's no space for ego at BioWare—you're only as good as your next game.

Zeschuk: Right. If you focus on how great something is or was, you'll get left behind because the game-design bar is constantly rising.

XBN: Will there be a sequel?

Muzyka: Sure. We're also working on another Xbox title with Microsoft that we will announce at the end of the year.

He's Sued Shady!

Conspiracy Entertainment recently sued rapper Eminem's management Cousins Management claiming it broke a contract the companies had to create an Eminem-based game.

Skinning The Box

Visit <http://www.gameconsoleskins.com/> and give your Xbox a new look without resorting to messy paints. The skins fit over the Xbox, cost \$7, and come in three great colors.

Brought To You By...

This particular issue of *Xbox Nation* was brought to you by the movie quote, "Duke! The frog's running!" and by delicious foods on sticks. The stick makes things taste good!

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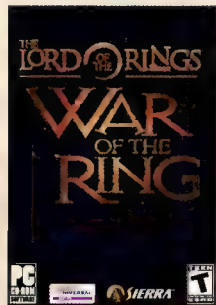
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Exploring gaming's sixth degree

Video-Fenky www.video-fenky.com

There are slick, articulate game sites on the Web...and then there is Video-Fenky. A mixture of console news and bitter Web log, this one-man show makes up for its text-laden structure with oodles of rumors from the U.S. and Japan developer scene. Perfect for when you absolutely must know where the Konami code came from.



Insert Credit www.insertcredit.com

If, let's say in an alternate reality, Xbox Nation were a Web site that ran features on "the death of game endings," and covered the full spectrum of video games, with news and stories from both sides of the Pacific, it'd look a lot like Insert Credit, an island of sanctity in a sea of gaming forums. But XBN is a magazine about Xbox games. And Insert Credit is a Web site. And that's that.



The Shizzolator www.asksnoop.com

For those who lie awake wondering what, say, Rush Limbaugh.com (www.rushlimbaugh.com) would read like if it were presented in the smooth rap stylings of Snoop Dogg, wonder no more. The Shizzolator will translate any plebeian Web site into the poetic prose of Mr. Dogg. It is, in fact, the bomb-diggity-niz-natch. Also, word to your mother's uncle.



OverClocked ReMix www.ocremix.org

The collective artists of OverClocked ReMix take classic videogame soundtracks and reimagine them through the filter of modern electronica. The site features a huge library of music, with highlights including a dancehall ragga version of the Super Mario Bros. theme, as well as a trance remix of the theme from Zelda: Link's Awakening. Turn on, tune in, and drop out.



The Next Level www.the-nextlevel.com

For those whose videogame obsession extends beyond their television screens and this magazine, The Next Level provides ample gaming goodness. Aside from news headlines and reviews, TNL features some of the best forums in the biz, with a wide assortment of elitist videogame junkies responding to such threads as "I hate videogame dreams" and "screenshot of the year."

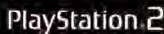


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GLADIATOR

EMULATION NATION

When it comes to classic gaming, emulation is the most sincere form of flattery. In this issue, *Xbox Nation* explores its love of Turkish prisons and gladiator games.

The Facts

Title: *Gladiator*
Publisher: Taito
Developer: Taito
Players: 1
Platform: Arcade
Original release: 1986

Premise: A side-scrolling hack-and-slash adventure, *Gladiator* puts players in mortal combat by forcing them to simultaneously operate both sword and shield. It's surprisingly deep and satisfying.

Trivia: As a game that featured removable armor pieces and one-hit kills, *Gladiator* was arguably the first arcade game to feature a topless female character. During a fight on Stage 1, players face off against Irene, "a mighty lady." Knocking off her breastplate in the Japanese version rewards players with, *voilà*—pink nipples.

The imminent releases of *Gladius* and *Gladiator: Sword of Vengeance* on Xbox

hearken back to a time (268 B.C.) when mainstream gaming was ultraviolent and ultrareal. It started out as a sacrificial rite, whereby warriors slain in the arena were thought to accompany fallen kings in the afterlife, but gladiatorial combat rapidly evolved from appeasing the dead to entertaining the living. As mass entertainment for unscrupulous Romans, a gladiatorial contest was the ultimate fighting game, giving bloodthirsty spectators the power to spare lives—or end them.

With such dramatic background to draw on for creative inspiration, it's a crying shame there aren't more gladiator-themed games worth a damn. The last mediocre pile of swords and Colosseums to which *Xbox Nation* was subjected went by the title *Circus Maximus* (five out of 10 in *XBN* 002).



■ The unspoken goal of *Gladiator*: to knock every piece of armor off the female enemies.



■ Decimus and Marco expressed their love by stabbing one another. Decimus died horribly.

With home consoles all but devoid of true gladiatorial goods, *XBN* turns to Taito's aptly titled arcade brawler *Gladiator* for its yearly dose of tough oily men who rock Caesar-cuts, horned bucklers, and armored skirts.

Released during the arcade boom of the mid-'80s, *Gladiator* brought the following innovations: 1) independent shield and sword control via joystick and button combos, 2) superhug

character sprites, and 3) one-hit kills. Throughout the melee, players try to destroy the armor covering various parts of their enemy's body, as well as protect their own. Losing a codpiece and then getting stabbed in the groin, for instance, pretty much spells the end of the match. Outdated visually by today's standards, *Gladiator* remains, nonetheless, one of the best...um, gladiator games ever made.

No one

The gameplay of I-Ninja is fast, hip, clever and tons of fun. Instead of a dark tale of vengeance, Ninja happily cuts enemies in half with his giant sword, throws shuriken and blows darts at them, all the while performing stunts that you'd expect to see in a game starring Tony Hawk. He can slide down rails, act like a human bowling ball, out-box Mike Tyson and even jump over deadly traps with the skill of a certain Italian plumber. Not even Jackie Chan has moves like his.



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Journal of Management Inquiry 22(1)

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unlocks all videos

HEARALL
unlocks all songs

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DUDEMASTER
unlocks all riders (and their bikes)

GARAGEKING
unlocks all bike parts



OHNNYE
unlocks all costumes for all riders

UNIVERSE
unlocks all levels and events

FLEXIMAN
unlocks all special stunt slots

IWANTITALL
unlocks everything



AGGRESSIVE INLINE

Get Mega Points
To get a ton of points on The Boardwalk, go to the tunnel with the skull and grind the side of it. Then, when your multiplier gets to 60 you jump off and watch your points rack up big time.

Get Power Skates
Successfully complete all challenges (normal and hidden) on every level to unlock the Power Skates. The Power Skates give you one blue stat point for every attribute.

Ultra Skates Successfully complete all the levels with 100% to unlock the Ultra Skates. The Ultra Skates give you another blue stat point for every attribute.

[illegible]

DARE TO LOG ON TO BUTTERFINGER.COM

Gamers for God



Ninety Christian game developers met up in Portland, OR, for July's Christian Game Developer's Conference. Attendees discussed the role of Christianity in videogames and how religious-themed games could be made more appealing.

Traditionally, gamers have not embraced titles with religious motifs. "The Christian games industry is a click or two behind the rest of the industry," Christian game publisher Brenda Huff said.

Frans For Games

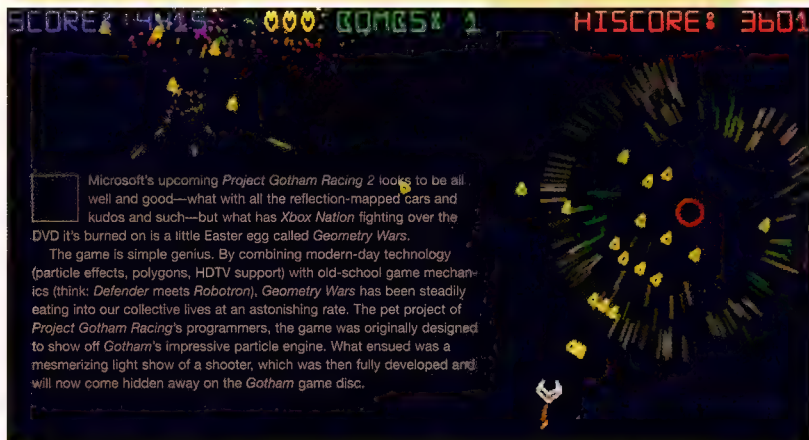


France, in an attempt to spur its games industry, will now offer aspiring game developers cash awards. BBC News reported that \$4,504,000 "was aimed at helping French firms weather rough times in the global market for games."

Under this plan, the BBC reported, the French government will pay for up to 40 percent of a game's cost, from concept to completion. It has been stated that no monies will be awarded for violent or pornographic titles. France joins the United States, China, South Korea, Australia, and Taiwan as countries that have directly allotted funds to stimulate independent game development.

GEOMETRY WARS

Unlockable mathematics bolster *Project Gotham Racing*'s...uh...racing



Microsoft's upcoming *Project Gotham Racing 2* looks to be all well and good—what with all the reflection-mapped cars and kudos and such—but what has *Xbox Nation* fighting over the DVD it's burned on is a little Easter egg called *Geometry Wars*.

The game is simple genius. By combining modern-day technology (particle effects, polygons, HDTV support) with old-school game mechanics (think: *Defender* meets *Robotron*), *Geometry Wars* has been steadily eating into our collective lives at an astonishing rate. The pet project of *Project Gotham Racing*'s programmers, the game was originally designed to show off *Gotham*'s impressive particle engine. What ensued was a mesmerizing light show of a shooter, which was then fully developed and will now come hidden away on the *Gotham* game disc.

AFGHANI COPS END ARCADE PARTY

Afghanistan says sayonara *Street Fighter*, see you later *Terminator*

Although one would think more forms of fun would be legal in the wake of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, the fall of the hard-line Islamic Taliban regime hasn't quite translated into a good time had by all. According to the Associated Press, police in the Eastern provincial capital of Jalalabad closed down more than 300 videogame shops in mid-July, citing the ever-popular crime of corrupting the youth.

This is the second time in a year that game and movie shops in Jalalabad have been shut down after pressure from parents and conservative groups. Last December, they were closed on the order of supreme court judge Fazal Hadi Shinwari, who also advocated a ban on cable television, and reopened after an edict banning entry to children under 16.

"The morals of the young people were corrupted there," Hajih Abib Shah, chief of the Jalalabad police, said. "Many things were done there that are forbidden by Islam." Apparently the menu at your average Afghan arcade includes liquor and gambling—both of which are proscribed by Islamic doctrine—in addition to games and DVD movies. Perhaps operators in America's moribund arcade scene could maybe take a tip from their Afghan counterparts to improve their flagging business.



Throttle Throttled

Goodbye, *Full Throttle: Hell on Wheels*. LucasArts recently earned the 3D adventure saying, "We do not want to disappoint the many fans of *Full Throttle*." Color us nonplussed.

Shemue III? Yu Said Yes!

Sources indicate Yu Suzuki and development house AM2 are moving forward with the development of *Shemue III*. There's no word, though, if the game is Xbox bound.

Knights For Charity

BioWare auctioned off autographed copies of its Xbox RPG *Star Wars: KOTOR* on eBay. Proceeds benefited the Royal Alex Hospital in Edmonton, and the winning bid was for \$182.50.



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RealLiveFantasies

Swords, sorcerers, and socials. Live a life less ordinary with *True Fantasy Live Online*, Xbox's first massively multiplayer RPG.

Words - Andrew Vestal and Che Chou



Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career.
Choose to be elves, dwarves, chiltos, and vugols.
Choose a big f*cking battle ax. Choose robes,
capes, breastplates, and a studio apartment. Choose good
health, big ears, and wacky hair colors. Choose a sex.
Choose your friends, choose your adventures. Choose *True
Fantasy Live Online*, a massively multiplayer online RPG
(MMORPG) hitting Xbox Live in early summer 2004.

Fantasy is the MMORPG genre as reimagined through
the eyes of Japanese developer Level 5. When asked by
Microsoft to create an RPG for Xbox, Level 5 counter-
offered with its own ambitions. "I suggested making [an
online RPG] because I feel that it's the future of gaming,"
Akhiro Hino, CEO/president and chief game designer of
Level 5 says. "I've been wanting to make an MMORPG, but
the opportunity hadn't popped up. When I started talk-
ing with Microsoft, I thought that with their
resources, I could make a game that required
such a large world."

As one of the hottest independent developers in Japan,
Level 5 is able to enjoy an unusually close relationship with
Microsoft. Its RPG portfolio is stunningly impressive; in
addition to Microsoft's *Fantasy*, the studio is developing the
Dark Cloud series for Sony and *Dragon Quest VIII* for Square
Enix. These three games for three diverse publishers are
united by a single gameplay philosophy: Each hopes
to provide the player with more than 100 hours'
worth of enjoyable things to see and do. "I think
that's really our company's calling card,"
Hino says. "Giving the player lots of
fun content."

Here, *Xbox Nation* explores the
vast frontier of MMORPGs by
focusing on Level 5's interpretation
of the genre.
Choose Live.
Choose community.
Choose your fantasies.





FINAL FANTASY LIVE

At July's Xbox Conference 2003 in Tokyo, Microsoft Corporate Vice President Peter Moore proudly unveiled the new unified global advertising campaign for Xbox: "It's good to play together." This short sentence would become the universal tagline advertising Xbox in all territories where the console is sold. The words were less a catchphrase than a manifesto, proudly declaring Microsoft's vision of gaming in the future. No longer an extra service just for hardcore gamers, Xbox Live would become the cornerstone of the Xbox experience for everyone. Online play via Xbox



Live was the console's defining characteristic.

Those days of the socially dysfunctional gamers playing solo in their living rooms are over, Moore said at the conference. "It is core to our beliefs that gaming is a social activity."

A noble sentiment, certainly—which makes it all the more unfortunate his statement isn't quite true yet. Xbox Live titles currently focus their attention on a small subset of the social experience: competition. A skilled player can shoot other gamers in first-person shooters, outrace them in racing games, and outscore them in sports titles. Some even let players compete in squads or teams, but the core of the gameplay is the same: *kill or be killed*. Crush or be crushed. Win or lose. A ladder is great for a score-based ranking system, but real social relationships are more akin to a web.

Competition is important in society, but so is cooperation; most societal interactions are some gray-hued mixture of the two. Relationships with other people are not a zero-sum game, and if the future of gaming is truly a social activity that Moore describes, then players need games that reflect this complex web.

Days of Being Mind

One of the first gaming genres to recognize the importance of social interaction was the role-playing game. The genre traces its roots to the publication of G. Gary Gygax's seminal pen-and-paper RPG, *Dungeons &*

Ultima Online: The Great Granddaddy of MMORPGs



Sir Dorksalot of the Square table didn't know the pickle he'd gotten into when he ran afoul of the Lizardmen's Carpenters Guild, Local 620.

Ultima Online (PC) is acknowledged as the game that started the modern MMORPG boom. Its gameplay is similar to text-based MUDs (multi-user dungeons), a genre popular in college computer labs since the '70s, but *Ultima Online* added state-of-the-art graphics and sound. More importantly, it had the Ultima name and world. When series patriarch Richard Garriott—aka Lord British—aka the man who practically invented the electronic RPG announced the franchise was going online, people listened. About 230,000 gamers still play the game, though because of its dated look and gameplay, popularity is steadily on the decline. Still, most who have moved on still remember fondly the game that started it all—including Level 5's president Akihiro Hino, who recalls endless late nights spent adventuring with Japanese players.



All aboard the night train / Like a smooth alligator / All aboard the night train / Such a cool calculator...

Dragons, almost 25 years ago. The freedom of human interaction is at the core of the paper-and-dice experience. Pen-and-paper RPGs aren't just about dice rolls and loot hoarding—at their best, they're about having creative fun with other people.

Digitally replicating the RPG experience meant that, with the absence of a human GM, freedoms had to be sacrificed. Game developers began looking online for creative real estate. They imagined a new kind of RPG with campaigns supporting hundreds, if not thousands, of gamers from all over the

Fantasy is the first MMORPG designed with console gamers in mind, and Level 5 has spent the last year filling its virtual Xbox Live paradise with content.

"When playing other MMORPGs, I was amused for the first 20 to 30 hours," Hino says. "But once I realized I was on a level treadmill, I got distressed."

The "treadmill" is the point when an RPG's equipment, items, enemies, and player characters all advance at precisely the same rate: Though the numbers change, the gameplay

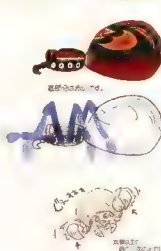


With True Fantasy Live Online, MMORPGs make a first true leap on to consoles

world. The computer would handle most of the dice rolls and stat checks behind the scenes, but a persistent game world would be constantly monitored by a group of real human GMs. Best of all, the large and active player population would automatically provide much of the game's content simply by virtue of their humanity.

MMORPGs, which originated on PC, are the first original genre of the online age—a new, utopian type of game only possible over the Internet. With *True Fantasy Live Online*, MMORPGs make their first true leap on to consoles.

ジャイアントスパイダー 上面、側面図



Fishing begets fish, with which players then use to make sushi. Yes, sushi online.



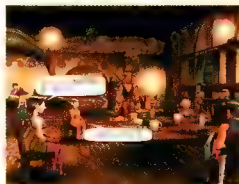


True Fantasy Live Online has abolished the concept of “leveling up” entirely.

remains the same. Hino has a more original solution.

“There are three game designers working underneath me,” he explains. “I made each of them take certain character professions and put together a life timeline for it, to see what happens within the first 10 hours, what happens during the following 10, what happens between hours 100 and 150—to make sure that a person can still enjoy playing

that role the whole time. *Fantasy* isn’t going to be the kind of game where the player



Although most communication takes place via voice, spoken macros also exist.



In the world of *True Fantasy Live Online*, day turns into night turns into day again.

just completes more quests.” And it’s also this very approach that will keep *Fantasy* fresh and interesting beyond the typical RPG honeymoon period.

Take This Job and Love It

If players grows bored with their character, they can simply make others—*Fantasy* supports up to five active characters per account. Level 5 is working hard to ensure that each of the nearly thirty character classes is unique. Many of the planned classes are of the traditional adventuring variety, focusing on weapon- or magic-based combat. Battles employ the

menu-based auto-attack system common to the genre. But there are new twists: *Fantasy* has abolished the concept of “leveling up” entirely, replacing it with a system of skill proficiencies. Combat and noncombat skills are upgraded by repeated use, and new skills are acquired through combinations of learned ones.

Hino hopes that this skill-based system lets players of different intensities group together effectively so casual and hardcore gamers won’t be stratified into different cliques. In fact, the game is designed so that casual gamers can enjoy it fully,



Create infinite characters, like Pat Montre meets Satan here, by altering 3D models.

but those who play more frequently can earn exclusive rewards. Hate fighting? Don't worry, there's room in *Fantasy*'s world for pacifists, too. "I don't see [*Fantasy*] as a combat-exclusive game, where the experience can be enjoyed only by people who have chosen combat professions," Hino says. He believes it's possible to play and enjoy a noncombat character without fighting for the entirety of a lifetime in *Fantasy*.

"For example, if your character is a cook, there could be a scenario where you face a cockatrice to get something from it to prepare a meal. The important thing here, however, is that you don't have to be a fighter or a warrior to defeat that cockatrice. You can still find another way—as a cook," Hino

explains. Afterward, players can go back into town, set up shop by the side of a main road and hock their wares, be it food, equipment (for would-be blacksmiths), clothing, and so forth. In fact, entrepreneurship is one of the main motivators of social interaction (via the

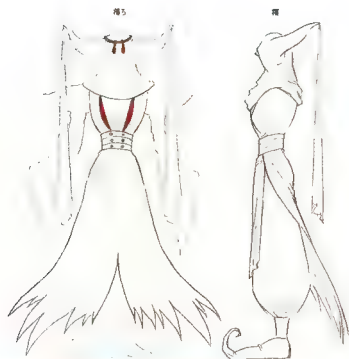


Lineage: The Most Popular MMORPG in the World



"What do they do, those Stonecutters? What don't they do? Oh, they do so many things they never stop. Oh, the things they do there. My stars."

Though most U.S. gamers have never heard of it, *Lineage: The Blood Pledge*'s (PC) 4 million subscribers make it the unquestioned international champion of the MMORPG genre. Only a handful of its players are in the United States—the great majority hail from South Korea, a country whose fevered love of online games is frequently surreal (at the height of its popularity in Korea, Blizzard's *StarCraft* had a promotional deal to appear on bags of Doritos). Pervasive broadband and Internet cafés are conducive to frequent play; gamers can pop in after school or work and play for a cheap hourly fee. In-game feuds between clans have sometimes escalated into real-world violence, giving the game an underground edge. Richard Garriott, father of the MMORPG genre, is currently working with NCSOFT to bring many of the company's popular Korean online titles to the States.



headset) in *Fantasy*.

Later on, Hino reiterates that "*Fantasy* has more emphasis on non-combat skills than on combat skills." Many MMORPGs have made this promise of enjoyable "noncombat" play (see the recent *Star Wars Galaxies* on PC), but *Fantasy* looks as if it will be the first to actually deliver.

Races and Play Styles

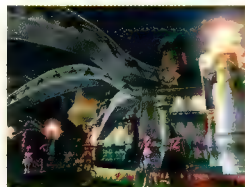
Fantasy's breadth of gameplay is matched only by its breadth of character types. The game's character-creation process is a far cry from the "choose your hair and face" of most MMORPGs. After selecting a

character's race from the five available—elf, dwarf, human, chillo, and vogul—nearly every aspect of that face and appearance can be selected, tweaked, stretched and modified. "I think this is my favorite part of the game!" Hino says. "There's so much variety to choose from when creating your character...it always makes people laugh."

To keep players' voices consistent with their online avatars, be they brawny righteous knights, wizened wizards, tiny elves, men, or women, *Fantasy* uses a voice-filtering system, similar to what already exists on Xbox Live. The only difference here is that,

judging from a recent playtest, these filters are actually very cool. Grown adults are audibly transformed into fairy sprites and hulking ogres, all in an attempt to maintain immersion.

The world of *Fantasy* is also filled with things to do. "Something in MMORPGs you can't find in single-player games," Hino notes, "is a virtual world actually running within the game." The world features a host of environments to explore, such as towns, caves, shrines, ruins, islands, mountains, and forests. Players can traverse this world using vehicles such as horses, camels, dragons, and even flying brooms.



We all want to be elves. Especially hot petite ones with skimpily little tops and long legs.

Final Fantasy XI: EverQuest With Better Graphics



Final Fantasy XI tells the touching story of a young woman and the plucky, determined onion boy who loved her. And the stew said boy was thrown into.

Though *True Fantasy Live Online* is the first MMORPG on Xbox, it's not the first one developed exclusively for consoles; that honor belongs to Square's *Final Fantasy XI* on the PlayStation 2. Don't let the number fool you: *Fantasy XI* bears only a superficial relationship to the previous 10 games in the series. The classes are traditional Final Fantasy, and series trademarks like chocobos and moogles are present, but *Fantasy XI* plays much more like the PC's *EverQuest* than a console RPG. Square's expectations for the title were sky high, as *Final Fantasy* games usually sell millions of units. *Fantasy XI* has about 200,000 subscribers in Japan; far less than Square had hoped. Many fans were frustrated by the company's seeming unwillingness to fix bugs or listen to player feedback. Recently, improved developer/player relations have boosted the game's image.

These areas feature a wide variety of activities for players; for example, a town might have a casino where users can gamble and make money, or a coliseum where users can fight monsters and place bets on the outcome of fights. "I hope to implement things that users would expect to see within a city or town as engaging activities in their own right," he says.

Another persistent world aspect that *Fantasy* explores is the notion of personal space. Players who subscribe to the game's service (pricing has yet to be announced) can reside in their own online studio apartments, complete with options to decorate and customize with items collected through various adventures. One can even invite friends over to chat and check out the digs.

While much of the game's history is still secret, players can ally themselves with one of several countries, such as the Kingdom of Cleria or the Magic City. It's likely that conflict between these countries will play a central role in the narrative of the game. "We plan to implement a system that changes the world of *Fantasy* as time passes," Hino says. It's possible that large narrative shifts will accompany gameplay tweaks and additional content.

Yet despite all this content, a world is nothing without people to populate it. Level 5 is designing *Fantasy* with the gamer's experience in mind. "The goal of the game is just to let players enjoy their lives and freedom," Hino says. "You have the freedom to make choices and pursue different paths, just like you do in real life."

Even the freedom to do things the



A group of courageous avatars charge the hump-backed cousin of Gamera on their mounted dragons.

items, skills, classes, monsters, pets, and foods than any console RPG to date. It's the biggest game ever from a company famous for big games.

Hino is most enthusiastic when talking about the people he hopes the game will attract. "Meeting up with new people, becoming friends with them, parting ways, and then getting together again," Hino grins, "that's an exciting and fun part of MMORPGs that's impossible with single-player games."

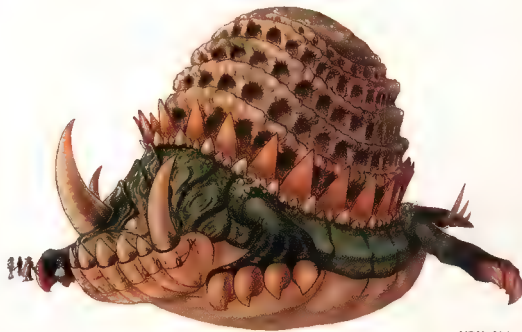


...can reside in their own
online studio apartments.

designers aren't anticipating? Hino smiles enthusiastically at this suggestion. "I'm all in favor of users being able to define the world. I really want to encourage users to participate and define the world as they like." He intends to stay in touch with players' desires via a planned in-game bulletin-board service (BBS) and popular *Fantasy* fan sites.

With more time to stew under development, *Fantasy* already has more environments, enemies, vehicles,

Unlike Microsoft's Moore, Hino doesn't believe that single-player games are on their way out. "The genres are fundamentally different," he explains. "A single-player game is akin to reading a book...you can play at your own pace, and that's a good thing. But it's also a solitary endeavor. Playing an MMORPG online is like going out with your friends and having a good time. People enjoy both—they like to have time to themselves, and they like to go out."





IN THE ARENA, WARRIORS WILL CLASH. BLOOD WILL BE SPILLED. CHAMPIONS WILL
THE GODS WILL SEEK VENGEANCE. NOT EVEN DEATH CAN STOP A TRUE HERO.



Blood and Gore
Intense Violence

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The background of the cover is a dark, atmospheric scene with a strong red color palette. In the upper half, there are silhouettes of Roman soldiers in armor, some holding spears and shields. The title "GLADIATOR" is written in large, golden, serif capital letters, and "SWORD OF VENGEANCE" is written below it in a similar but slightly smaller font. The lower half of the cover shows a gladiator in a dynamic pose, glowing with a red aura, and another figure in the background. The overall mood is intense and dramatic.

GLADIATOR

SWORD OF VENGEANCE

NOTHING LESS THAN TO THE DEATH

BE MADE. IN AN ANCIENT EMPIRE, EVIL WILL ALTER THE STRANDS OF FATE. AND
FEATURING NEW AND EXCLUSIVE DEATH MOVES. THE END IS SEVERE.

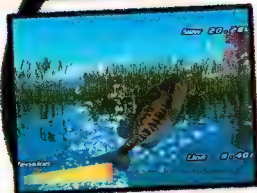
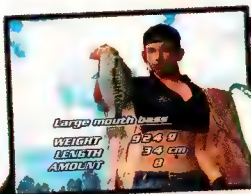
www.acclaim.com/gladiator



PlayStation 2



KISS MY BASS!



PRO-CAST

SPORTS FISHING GAME

Get back to nature and experience the struggle of man versus fish in Pro Cast Sports Fishing. It's the most comprehensive bass fishing simulation game on the Xbox. Become the top angler in tournament fishing. Customize your weather and time settings. And discover a treasure trove of hidden secrets that may lead you to the legendary big mouth bass that has spawned fishtales for years!



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PlayLogic's Xyanide

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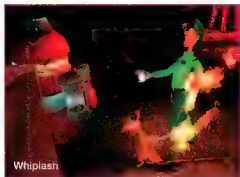
Tanchu: Return From Darkness



Sega GT Online



Rogue Ops



Whiplash

FORWARD TO THE FUTURE

Peer into what soon will be right this very minute

The annual holiday game surge is nearly upon us, and it's safe to say that no sane human has the time or the energy to play through all of it. Fortunately, we at *Xbox Nation* are far from sane.

Despite the stampede of digital goodness on its way, however, it should be noted that Microsoft's end-of-year first-party lineup is currently looking a bit grim. Major releases—namely *Halo 2*, *Fable*, *Sudeki*, and *Psychonauts*—have slipped into 2004, which leaves us with titles such as *Crimson Skies*, *Project Gotham 2*, and a slew of XSN-supported sports titles representing the console this Christmas/Hanukkah/

Kwanzaa/December. Now don't get us wrong: we're much happier seeing potentially triple-A games given the development time they need rather than a stingy first-party rushing them to market before they've properly matured. It just seems odd that nothing more inspired has come out of Redmond for what is now its third holiday season.

During a recent discussion with Microsoft higher-ups, we were assured the company has switched its strategy from one of breadth to one of depth, focusing more on producing quality titles than "hitting every genre." XBN eagerly awaits the results.

SEGA GT ONLINE

Developer: WOW Entertainment

Publisher: Sega

Expected Release: Fall 2003

Origin: Japan

On the information superhighway, the only loser is the one who gets laughed at by all the winners. Welcome to the world of *Sega GT Online*.

As a teenager, Rikiya Nakagawa loved tearing through the streets of Monte Carlo in his one-of-a-kind Formula One machine. The year was 1980, and Nakagawa's then-obsession was *Monaco GP*, a seminal arcade racer that prophesied Sega's two-decade devotion to perfecting the secret chemistry between car and player.

"Sega GT Online continues the focus on heritage and design that was established in the last game."

Now, as the president of WOW Entertainment, Nakagawa is reliving a dream-come-true as he revisits both track and dealership to amass empirical data for *Sega GT Online*, pseudo-sequel to last year's Xbox driving simulator.

"Generally, we held the test drives close to the car dealerships we rent from," Nakagawa says, describing the research his team conducted to beef up *GT Online*. "We ended up gathering so much info on each of the cars that the game planner's desk was literally buried under data." This mountain of

reference material made possible *GT Online*'s continued pursuit of simulating diverse autos, vintage and new.

"*Sega GT Online* continues the focus on heritage and design evolution that was established in the last game," Nakagawa says. "Last year, our oldest cars were from the 1960s, but this year we have some from the '50s and even a few from the '20s and '30s." More than 45 new cars will join the ranks of last year's 120-vehicle roster, with highlights from exotic manufacturers such as Lotus (England), Caterham (England), De Tomaso (Italy), and Bugatti (France). It's also interesting to note that Nakagawa has delved into feedback from fans and car owners, both on and offline, in a quest for nuance and subtlety only enthusiasts can provide—and only automotive *otaku*s will appreciate. "Without understanding a driver's passion for a specific car, you cannot accurately capture its essence," he says.

More of an update than a full-blown sequel, *GT Online* is essentially a director's-cut version of last year's Xbox sim, but loaded now with extra features and an ambitious online component that will be the first of its kind on Live. But for Nakagawa, taking



Classic cars (like this Nissan Bluebird SSS) sit alongside modern cars as Mazda's sleek RX-8.

Sega GT Online means more than just re-creating the standard model of competitive chaos currently seen in Live-enabled racers such as *Midnight Club II* and *Moto GP 2*. "Sega *GT Online* is designed for people with the same passion for racing and the same taste in cars to be able to gather together on Xbox Live," he says. The word "gathering," normally used to describe a social meeting of auto enthusiasts in the United States, carries a slightly different meaning in Japan, where gatherings are showcases of racing skill and talent. Nakagawa aims to capture the soul of auto gatherings and develop a true virtual car culture on both sides of the Pacific through a number of innovative





□ An early version of GT Online's user interface, complete with squiggly Japanese characters.



□ Winning the downhill with a 120-horsepower subcompact puts hair on your chest.



Xbox Live features.

To build GT Online's virtual-racing community, Nakagawa is, first and foremost, stressing team-based competition for up to 12 players. "Not only can you enjoy traditional [even-one-for-yourself] style races, it's [also] possible to compete with innovative rules that are unique to online gaming," he says. Team Battle mode, for instance, is a lap-based affair in which teammates cooperate and go head-to-head against other teams in a relay race. In Navigate Battle mode, one

player assumes the role of a navigator while leading his/her partner behind the wheel through foggy, low-visibility tracks. Just like in a rally race, the navigator here will have a clear view of the track, allowing him to sound off vocally (via the headset) on corners and road conditions. Furthering the online community extends beyond just gameplay with Online's integrated global-ranking system, which grades players on fastest lap times, total number of victories over losses, and a slew of other single-player unlockables. Plus, the

fact that Online's ranking system spans U.S., Japanese, and presumably European Xbox Live servers also means players can look forward to international competition.

But Nakagawa stressed that

Online's virtual community was more than just one-upmanship. Gathering car lovers from around the world can be as much about social interaction with speed freaks and gear heads as it is about competition. Similar to last

Garage Rock (but no Devo)



For its U.S. release, Sega of America will ditch the Japanese GT Online's lethargic, smooth jazz soundtracks in favor of pop/punk/rock music from bands across a variety of independent labels. Highlights include tunes from up-and-comers Ted Lasso, Pharmacists, and a track by rock band Ea, with Xbox Nation's senior editor, Che "Geddy" Choulli, being





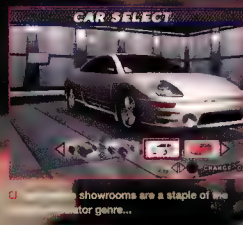
year's prequel, players can join a virtual garage in *GT Online* with cars, trophies, replay photos, and various accessories—only those owners on Xbox Live have the option to invite others over to check out the digs, trade unlocked vehicles, and chew the fat via the headset.

In the world of *GT*, admirability is an important virtue, which is also why

the team included a Spectator mode for players to observe and learn from those more skilled. Nakagawa adds, "You can also cheer or jeer via voice chat, and enjoy races by freely switching camera views."

To entice Xbox owners who may already have purchased last year's *Sega GT 2002*, Sega is making a gamer-friendly move by releasing *Online* for \$20. Nakagawa, whose bread and butter is the life and health of a racing genre teetering on the brink of stagnation, believes that more life-like computer A.I. is the next step. He recognizes that A.I. racing opponents have a long way to go—which is why, for Nakagawa, bringing *Sega GT* online was the next best thing.

The Chou



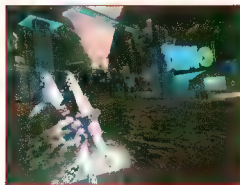
Car showrooms are a staple of the racing genre...



...while at the same time?

Gathering car fans virtually can be as much about **competition** as it is about **social interaction**.





□ Air pirates tried soaring in the wings of love, but would oftentimes get shot down.

CRIMSON SKIES: HIGH ROAD TO REVENGE

□ Developer: FASA Studios

□ Publisher: Microsoft

□ Expected Release: Fall 2003

□ Origin: Redmond, WA

From paper-and-dice gameplay to Xbox Live connectivity, FASA's *Crimson Skies* is shaping up to be an online darling this holiday season

Before *Crimson Skies* was Microsoft's poster boy for the *MechAssault*-inclined Xbox Live addicted masses. Even before it was a forgettable, watered-down flight simulator on the PC, *Skies* was a board game featuring collectible miniatures as its main draw. But throughout its dice-to-joysticks evolution, the series' pulpy, steampunk pedigree remained unchallenged. Even now, it's a fitting resource for the retelling of a modern pirate mythos.

Set in an alternate reality circa 1930s, the United States—having felt its death knell by the Great Depression—has splintered into 20 feuding countries. The battered economy, once fueled almost entirely by the railroad industry, turns an aggressive eye towards air travel as its main mode of transit. But where there's commerce across a new frontier, there are also pirates, and in the case of *Skies*, air pirates operating propeller planes loaded with brass and lead

As a game that's now approaching its three-year incubation period within FASA's development studio, the title was shaping up to be just another PC-to-console translation wrapped in a shiny coat of Xbox visuals. "What we realized was that the whole approach of making a playable movie just wasn't working," Jim Napier, project lead for the *Skies* team told Xbox.com. "It was too linear. We had really good graphics and an interesting story to tell, but it just wasn't open enough."

Now, *Skies* will allow players to further the narrative by choosing story-specific missions at will, while at the same time, opening the whole of the level for free-roam exploration and money-making side-quests.

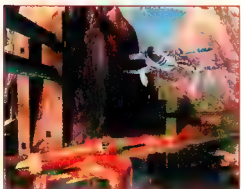
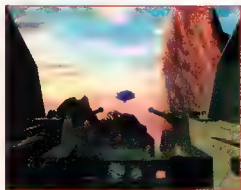
Hands-on tests with a preview version of *Skies* made the impression that, while these solo distractions are a welcome mix for a game that plays a lot like online sensation *MechAssault*, *Skies* is obviously going to be remembered as "that online dogfighting title"



□ Using this newfangled gyrocopter, a man could fly around the world in 825 days!

for Xbox Live. Pat Schreiber, a key programmer for the game, has no qualms about *Skies*' accessibility. "We are a flight-based game, but we feature lots of the big explosions FASA is known for," he says. "People are going to like the way they can blow things up." Which could be a good thing, provided FASA also pulls off its promise of copious multiplayer modes, as well as downloadable aircraft and levels in the months following *Skies*' release.

Che Chau



...*Skies* is obviously going to be remembered as **“that online dogfighting title”** for Xbox Live.

□ A mad scientist created this robotic tick, a twisted pile of cold metal and cruel dreams. Sadly, it was the size of a real tick, and thus, was easily defeated by a stiff breeze.



TENCHU: RETURN FROM DARKNESS

Dev: K2 LLC Release: Q1 2004
Pub: Activision Origin: Japan

Unlike *Ninja Gaiden*, *Tenchu: Return from Darkness* is a ninja game of the deliberate, plodding variety—no wall-running, no machine guns, and absolutely no flaming, discus-sized shurikens. The game centers around the exploits of two ninja assassins in the service of Lord Ghoda, and one physician-cum-killer (who, quite literally, gets crazy with a surgical pin).

The game's missions are built around familiar hide-and-stick stealth mechanics, and the payoff is definitely in the sticking. The *Tenchu* series is known for causing the Bursline Meter™ to self-implode with the gratuitousness of its stealth-kill animations, and *Return from Darkness* is no different. Decapitations are on the mild side of things; swords stuck lengthwise through the tops of peoples' heads are on the extreme end. Couple this with healthy doses of ninja magic and ninja gadgets (smoke bombs, watchdog poison, grappling hooks), and one has a veritable interactive encyclopedia of 8th-grade fantasies, circa 1990.

The PlayStation 2 iteration had its share of kinks (bottomless pits with no warning, poor A.I. and collision); the Xbox version will see some of these ironed out. A.I. is being massaged out of its catatonic state, and a "retry" feature will help alleviate the rage caused by said pits. There is word, too, of new missions, as well as an all-new boss.

The most exciting news, however, is that the game will feature a slick Xbox Live component. This will take the form of a cooperative multiplayer mode, that allows players to match up on Live and go at it with the A.I. across six different maps. It's nice to finally see developers incorporating online co-op modes instead of the standard deathmatch. The subterfuge and mutilation will commence next spring.



ProTip: Readers are advised to embrace the shadows until it's time to strike.



XYANIDE

Developer: Playlogic Publisher: Playlogic Expected Release: Winter 2003 Origin: Holland

The 2D shooter makes a triumphant return in...3D? *Xbox Nation* sits down with the team behind *Xyanide* amid a storm of bullets, shrapnel, and digital mayhem.

New publishers tend not to take risks. As is often the case, it's easier to conform, to slipstream the big players, to stick with big genres. Based in the small town of Breda, 50 miles outside Amsterdam, new publisher Playlogic's in-house studio seems to have something much more intriguing in gestation.

Xyanide is an unabashedly hardcore shoot-em-up—an ambitious hybrid of old-school 2D gaming with modern 3D effects. It's not a stealth-based FPS; you don't play a crack commando chasing terrorists around accurately mapped cities. Instead, you're in a spaceship battling endless waves of regular boss encounters. It's the '80s revisited and turbo-charged. It's every *R-Type* veteran's Xbox dream.

Based in the far-off future, the story concerns an evil yet angelic-looking child witch, Agura, who has been sentenced to death for mass genocide. The method of extermination is novel—she is to be placed in a spaceship and shot into the heart of a black hole. To ensure

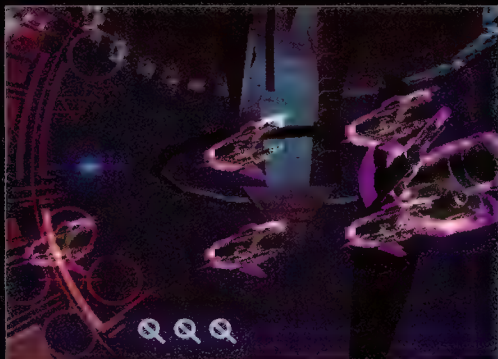
she gets there, the ship is accompanied by another piloted by the galaxy's greatest star fighter. You.

En route, a meteor containing xyanide—a substance that causes thoughts to materialize into reality—hits the execution ship. Immediately Agura uses this to transmogrify her space coffin into an ever changing, heavily defended realm. And it's your job to fly through the corridors of this morphing behemoth in an attempt to destroy Agura once and for all.

So, this is how one would imagine an '80s coin-op would work when it's zapped into the 21st century. *Xyanide*

employs a sturdy 3D engine based on Criterion's RenderWare technology. While you (or you and a friend; the game supports two-player action) fly through each enemy-packed level, the camera swoops and spins around your craft with breathtaking speed and fluidity. You control the ship's movement around the screen via the left analog stick, but the route is essentially predetermined. Meanwhile, you can fire 360 degrees around your ship using the right analog stick to direct the auto-firing flow. It's a truly innovative system, requiring plenty of coordination, and forcing you to think in a weird 2.5D

Xyanide is an ambitious hybrid of **old-school 2D gaming** with modern 3D effects.

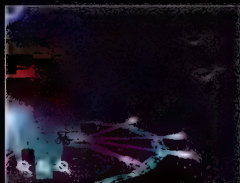
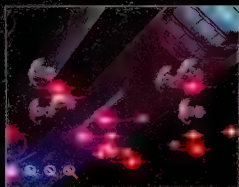


Ship design is bizarrely organic—one was based on the thorax of a dog, Woof.

plane flying in one direction while firing all around you.

As one might expect from a shooter taking its inspiration from classics of the genre (the team specifically cites *Raiden*, *R-Type*, and *Mutant Storm*), there are plenty of pick-ups to harvest en-route. Most important are the mutators: 27 items that, when collected, evolve a ship into a more powerful version of itself. The more you pick up, the more your craft evolves—increasingly powerful primary laser weapons, secondary missile systems, etc.

There are two different types of mutator: Mech and Organic. The Mech path features a focused laser that concentrates a lot of damage on a single point; the Organic path gives players a more scattergun weapon that blasts a larger area with less damage-intensive,



Playlogic reckons 40 to 60 hours of gameplay, while Live allows for downloads and high scores.

The Mech/Organic dichotomy also features in the level design. The first few levels have a Mech flavor—vast metallic spiraling caverns, the surfaces covered in lit windows like the sides of an Imperial Star Destroyer. The art team claims to have drawn inspiration for this look from the Fritz Lang sci-fi classic *Metropolis*, and there exists a graceful, steampunk beauty in these structures. Later, as Aguirre's mind interfaces more closely with her creation, the environments become more Organic. The world resembles the messy insectoid constructions of *Alien* and its ilk, and artists employ specular lighting to give surfaces a moist, shiny look.

Dynamic lighting enlivens laser beams and enemy spawn animations. A rich particle system creates astonishing explosions that blast sparking debris into every corner. Screen deformation and ripple effects send shockwaves from major explosions. You also get a lovely semitransparent HUD down the left side of the screen, which not only lists power-ups, score, and damage, but also reveals weak points in boss armor—an immersive feature that breaks down the traditional divide between the functional screen furniture and the game action itself.

Keith Stuart



DINOSAUR HUNTING

□ Dev: Scarab □ Release: Fall 2005
□ Pub: Microsoft □ Origin: Japan

Microsoft has come up with some unusual ideas in its quest to crack the Japanese market, but a 3D great-lizard-hunting game from the makers of the *Grand Slam* pro-wrestling series has to take the prize. *Dinosaur Hunting* is truth in advertising personified: Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to stalk and bag a host of surviving reptiles from an Amazonian Lost World.

Though it features giant lizards as its main attraction, this game seems like the antithesis of Capcom's *Dino Crisis*. 3. There are no ray guns or fanciful dinosaur designs. Rather, it looks for all the world like a serious hunting simulation. Set in the early 20th century, *Hunting* features downright antiquated technology. One of the keys to taking down dinosaurs effectively, for instance, is formulating the right flavor of tranquilizer cocktail—some species are more vulnerable to certain narcotics than others.

That comes into play only after you find the beasts, though, which apparently takes some doing. Much of each hunt is taken up with the business of tracking—following each dinosaur by its footprints, spoor, and carcasses it leaves behind. Various sidekicks are there to help, and it seems that their loyalties will shift somewhat as the game's story unfolds.

As was the case with the company's financing of Capcom's decidedly left-field project *Steel Battalion*, one must give Microsoft credit for authenticity here: It's an unusual game concept, and the wide selection of screens released show off impressive 3D artwork (not to mention the fact that it has actually made dinosaur dung an actual game-play element). Dolby 5.1-channel sound and HDTV support should also make for an enveloping hunting environment. Whether this will play in Peoria, Tokyo, or anywhere else, of course, still remains to be seen.



□ Young Keith Richards was very pleased to meet (and smoke) his first real fan.



GLADIATOR: THE CRIMSON REIGN

□ Dev: Midway □ Release: Fall 2003
□ Pub: Midway □ Origin: England

□ The most interesting thing about Midway's latest contribution to the annals of videogame history is its novel combat system. Each of your gladiator's hands is mapped to a controller button; hold various weapons in either hand, then use the assigned buttons to swing them individually. Also of note is the fact that a gladiator's performance will be continuously evaluated by the crowd throughout the game's 31 arenas. Fight well and they'll toss out power-ups to heal your fighter (most likely a rump roast, or perhaps a ham hock); fight like a punk and they'll throw rocks, damaging your gladiator. Not the deepest game ever made, *Gladiator* is essentially the melee equivalent of Midway's NBA Jam/NFL Blitz/NHL Hitz triviumvirate.



MAFIA

□ Dev: Take-Two □ Release: Fall 2003
□ Pub: Gotham Games □ Origin: England

□ *Mafia* will make you an offer you can't refuse: Play this game or die from a mysterious isopick accident after which the coroner will shrug at the 33 stab wounds on your body. A third-person shooter in the style of *Max Payne*, *Mafia* demands respect or you'll be sleeping with the fishes. Its plot-driven story inserts players into the 1930s as two warring factions, the Sallien and Morello families, shoot it out for supremacy. Missions will have would-be goodfellas running and gunning, driving around the fictional Lost Heaven, and being ever wary of not leaping headfirst into danger as the game provides minimal opportunities for healing. A brief hands-on test revealed scenes where players could pop enemies while they were on the hopper, and engage in a thrilling ball-out gunfight held in a poolhall. It looks quite good on Xbox, too, having lost none of the fluidity of its PC twin.



WHIPLASH

□ Dev: Crystal Dynamics □ Pub: Eidos Interactive □ Release: October 2003 □ Origin: Menlo Park, CA

Used and abused, Spanx the weasel and Redmond the rabbit find revenge is sweeter than sugar-laced maple syrup. It's clobberin' time, bunny style.

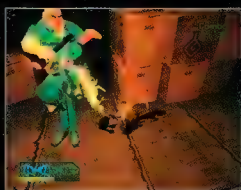
□ "I must be cruel, only to be kind," William Shakespeare noted in *Hamlet*. The Xbox game *Whiplash* takes a different approach to cruelty, one advocated by Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck's creator Tex Avery. Avery knew, in his heart of hearts, that comedy is when the other guy slips on a banana peel. Better still, high comedy is when one funny animal whacks another on the head with a mallet, causing it to tumble around madly into a banana peel, after which it delightfully slips into a set bear trap and then gets run over by a steamroller.

Meet Spanx the weasel and Redmond the bunny, two unfortunate critters who've been experimented on and are chained together at the wrists. They're the stars of the 3D action platformer *Whiplash* and perhaps the greatest argument for cruelty toward animals (Redmond in particular) the Earth has ever seen. It's their mission to escape the clutches of the evil cor-

poration Genron and to create mayhem in the grand style of every cute cartoon critter that's ever picked up a lit stick of dynamite with the intent to stuff it down another's shorts.

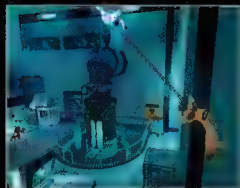
Players control Spanx, with Redmond toted along as both weapon and tool. Spanx can hurl his bunny pal at enemies or equipment to smash them up but good. If Redmond hits enough enemies, he'll go ballistic, madly attacking every enemy in sight. In addition, Spanx can twirl Redmond around by the chain, creating a helicopter effect that increases the distance of the duo's leaps. And, for added lunacy as well as specific benefit, Spanx can forcibly stuff his partner into a series of machines to create, among others, Fire Bunny, Toxic Bunny, Chocolate Bunny, Ice Bunny, Helium Bunny, and Electric Bunny. Depending on the powerup, Redmond will become a weapon, tool, or means by which a puzzle can be solved.

Big evil awaits our heroes. The vile



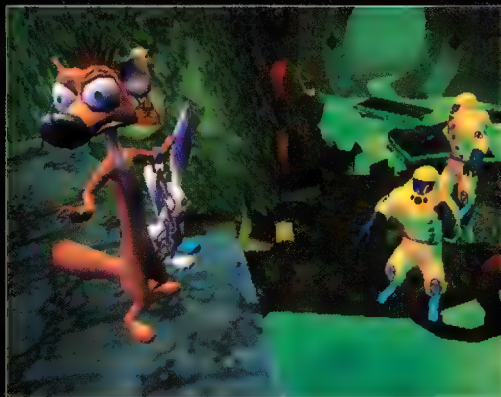
□ Flame on! Here, Fire Bunny uses the power of flame to scorch his enemies.

conglomerate Genron stamps monkeys with makeup, shoots hamsters out of a cannon (The Hamster Cannon, naturally) into a Velcro wall, and has tested Spanx and Redmond past the limits of animal endurance. A plethora of guards, Haz-Mat engineers, scientists, security robots, chemists, and Roboweasels lay in wait, seeking to kill the protagonists. At the game's conclusion, the duo will be challenged by Genron's evil chief Franklin, a heartless sult very much



intent on keeping his animals enslaved.

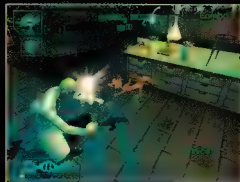
A hands-on playtest revealed a platformer that's genuinely funny and certainly deeper than its "smash everything" style of play would suggest. In certain areas, Spanx can toss Redmond into a floating socket, trapping the bunny there just long enough for the weasel to swing across to a



BLACK 9

□ Dev: Taldren □ Release: Winter 2003
□ Pub: Majesco □ Origin: Costa Mesa, CA

Taldren, developer of the *Starfleet Command* PC strategy games, is trying its hand at console gaming, and early hands-on play reveals an action adventure riddled with flaws. A sci-fi game set in the near-future, *Black 9* puts players up against secret societies and illuminati sects. What sets the game apart from other third-person shooters are its RPG aspects allowing players to upgrade and evolve their cyber-warriors. It's promising, but judging from an early build, *Black 9* lacks the execution and fundamental design to pull it off. Characters animate with the convincing swag of soulless plastic automatons, and combat (both projectile and melee) is nothing short of groan-inducing. Maybe it's just an early version of the game. Or maybe, just maybe, Taldren is on the wrong track and headed for disaster. Time will tell.



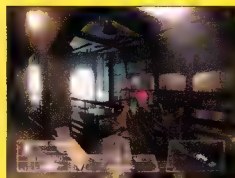
One stage requires Spanx and Redmond to **commandeer a chicken cannon.**

new platform, Indiana Jones-style. In Genron's cafeteria, Marge the lunchlady sits behind protective glass and shoots food at Redmond and Spanx until her machine is shattered. One stage requires Spanx and Redmond to commandeer a chicken cannon, and the pair will then be able to work in concert with one another, firing poultry at Roboweasels.

Whiplash contains nine major game-play areas, all linked by three hubs. Sixteen or so animals ranging from elephants to chihuahuas are included; some, when freed, help Redmond and Spanx by attacking nearby foes. The Xbox version of the game will include the requisite graphic enhancements, and may come with the ability to create customized soundtracks.

Footloose and fun, *Whiplash* promises to be a solid, and quite destructive, adventure in the grand style of Looney Tunes. It's cute and colorful without being condescending toward its audience. It's also a solid mix of slapstick comedy and pointed satire aimed straight at a society that consistently turns a blind eye to animals being maimed in the interest of better living.

Tex Avery would be pleased.
Greg Orlando



RAINBOW SIX 3

□ Dev: Ubi Soft Montreal
□ Pub: Ubi Soft

Rainbow Six 3, the tactical shooter formerly known as *Raven Shield* on the PC, has certainly taken no one by surprise. The premise of the game, as anyone who's ever read a Tom Clancy novel or played one of his officially endorsed console titles will know, puts players in the Kevlar of a counterterrorist "rainbow coalition" to battle extremist factions wherever they may reside.

Two major strengths set *Rainbow* apart from its contemporaries on Xbox and create excitement for its brand of tactical violence. First, *Rainbow* on Xbox has been completely revamped

□ Expected Release: November 2003
□ Origin: Canada

from its PC counterpart. Now, the game is looking better than ever on its newly optimized *Splinter Cell* engine, which makes ample use of lighting, shading, and detailed environments for a convincing, immersive experience.

Second, and most important, *Rainbow* features an extensive and eminently playable multiplayer mode for up to 16 participants on Xbox Live. Made even better by the game's excellent, tactile controls, *Rainbow* may even overtake Microsoft's much-anticipated *Counter-Strike* as Xbox Live's military shooter to beat for the upcoming holiday season.



AMPED 2

□ Dev: MS Games □ Release: Fall 2003
□ Pub: Microsoft □ Origin: Salt Lake, UT

□ The development philosophy behind *Amped 2* is somewhat akin to that which guides the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* series. Neversoft's skating opus essentially perfected the notion of fusing realistic moves, professionals, and environments with subtly exaggerated physics and combos, striking a chord with both longtime skaters and new recruits alike. In fairly stark contrast to Electronic Arts' over-the-top snowboarding fantasy *SSX*, *Amped 2* brings this same relatively understated mentality to the slopes.

Of course, the sequel will feature all of the requisite beefiness: twice as many mountains and runs, 16 real pros, and a significantly improved graphics engine. Also new to the game is the sport of snowskating, which is sure to please the snowboarding elite. A snowskate—shorter and narrower than a snowboard—is a twin-tipped, skateboard-sized board with a grippy foam top sheet rather than bindings, allowing for an entirely new set of skateboard-like tricks and moves on snow.

Clearly the most exciting thing about the game is its Xbox Live play; not only will *Amped* feature competitive and freestyle snowboarding competitions, but it will also support XSN, meaning players will be able to join tournaments, participate in leagues, and avail themselves of various content downloads. Included as part of the package are 300 music tracks from a wide range of musical artists. (For the curious, Microsoft and the indie record labels essentially swap exposure for music, and virtually no money is exchanged.)

A recent preview build still displays some of the same problems found in the original: awkward transitions between trick and landing animations, generally corny stylings, and somewhat floaty controls. Fans of the first game should be pleased with this sequel's various improvements, however, and *Amped*'s online voice chat should help fulfill those without the cash for a trip to Vail.



□ Aren't you glad you used Dial, bro? Don't you wish everybody did, bro?



THE SIMS: BUSTIN' OUT

Developer: Maxis

Publisher: EA

Expected Release: Fall 2003

Origin: Walnut Creek, CA

Electronic Arts' little computer people belch, fart, whiz on the rugs, and do the wild thing. In short, they have a better life than you do.

Young Dudley Landgrab, patron of the social arts, has just extended his finger to a fellow simulated human. When the Sim takes said finger and gently pulls, Landgrab vents gas. If it wasn't made plain by the green fumes emanating from Landgrab's nether regions and the other Sim's horrified reaction, someone just let the dogs out. Whoop. Whoop. If prompted, the delightful fellow will also rear back and produce a roaring belch into the face of an unsuspecting victim. Welcome to *The Sims: Bustin' Out* or, more appropriately, *The Sims: The Gross-Out Years*.

Bustin' Out takes the beloved and oftentimes incontinent Sims on their second console adventure. This time, the game will be an all-new creation, separate from *The Sims* and its follow up, the still-being-developed PC-only title *The Sims 2*. Developers at Maxis promise 100 new unlockable items, vehicles which can transport a character from here to there (including a

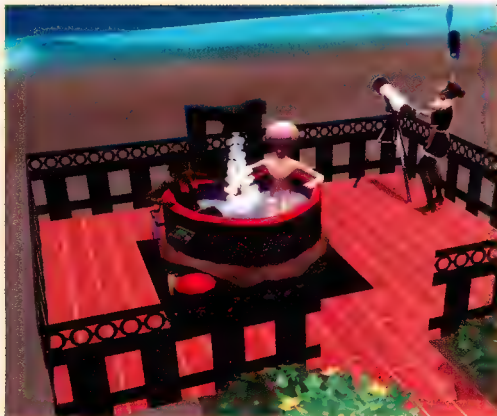
swank limousine with a hot tub in the back), new professions, and graphics to shame the previous iterations of the Sim series. Old characters, such as mom ("She's still just as schizophrenic," notes the game's designer Mike Perry) make return appearances and are given a whole new shine with new and odd behaviors.

Bustin' Out's new look begins with a redone set of character creation screens that now give players an indication of their created Sims' basic personality. Here, a male Sim, garbed in a purple suit Liberace would find

tacky, begins to jog in place. Not coincidentally, the Sim's active trait has just been increased. An active and outgoing Sim might perform handstands. A shy one might notice the garish clothing he's wearing and act embarrassed. If not terribly functional, these character-creation screens are at least informative and entertaining.

During gameplay, Sims can schlep out to various locations. Sim veterans Bella and Mortimer Goth now live in a haunted mansion of sorts; in one room, Mortimer plays an elaborate pipe organ, in another, Bella activates an

Welcome to *The Sims: Bustin' Out* or, more appropriately, ***The Sims: The Gross-Out Years***.



incubator and uses it to create a plant that will attract flies and consume them (as a purely fanciful aside, players can also feed this plant garbage and, if the thing eats too much garbage too quickly, well...things—very bad things—will happen.) Expect also to visit Pixel Acres, a nudist

colony with a hot spring. Unfortunate Sims who happen to be bathing when the colony's spring turns into a geyser are vomited straight into the upper atmosphere. There's a dance club where players can use their creativity on a turntable to throw the hottest dance party since *Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo*, as well as a scientist's lab where shiny things are put to good and, sometimes, evil use.

Each location holds unlockable items and different quests. Rewards are doled out for the Sim that completes these missions; at the Goth's house, a séance table must be used to contact the dead. Failure will be mocked with message from the ether stating, "Your group's creativity sucks. Here is some ash." The successful completion of the



task ensures the Goths will give players goodies in return, and new gameplay areas will be unlocked. Interaction with the different characters means expanding their ability to interact with others; new behaviors and actions, such as Landgrab's burp or a moonwalk, can be learned by chatting with other Sims.

There will be never-before-seen professions, or at least ones that put a new shine on old favorites. Players can become gangsters, mad scientists, fashion victims, paramilitary types, or movie stars. This time, the goal will not be to beat one career but, rather, to beat them all. To make the competition even more fierce, the developers have included a complete two-player mode that can be played at any time; players can save their Sim to a memory card and transport it to a friend's machine.

Classic *Sims* elements, of course, remain intact. There will still be accidents to mop up when a Sim's bladder swells past tolerance, and lots of Simulated English ("Simlish") to puzzle over. Bad things can still be done to good Sims by evil-minded players and, all told, the combination of new goodies and well-loved features makes this video life worth living once again.



SPAWN

□ Dev. Point of View □ Release: Fall 2003
□ Pub: Namco □ Origin: Austin, TX

□ Kiss your ass goodbye. The end is nigh: Angels are preparing to start the all-out war between good and evil, and what's a hellspawn to do?

Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* (you may remember him from such comic books as *Spawn*) steps into the spotlight with this third-person brawler. Using hand-to-hand combat, cool weapons, and special hell powers, *Spawn* will toss himself headfirst into the war, battling both the angels and the devils, including bosses from the comics such as Cy-Gor and the demonic Violator.

If *Spawn* was a meal, it would be a standard burger topped with standard sauce. There are some interesting facets—*Spawn* can attack with his chains, and suck in green necroplasm to fuel his Glow power, illuminating the screen to find hidden areas—but it'd be smart to wait for the review next issue.



NEED FOR SPEED: UNDERGROUND

□ Dev: EA Blackbox □ Release: Fall 2003
□ Pub: EA □ Origin: Canada

□ Last year's *Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 2* signaled the fact that racing games are finally starting to wake from their long, post-*Gran Turismo* slumber. For its follow-up project, developer Blackbox is offering sacrifices at the pantheon of illegal street racing to bring to Xbox one of its most enthralling arcade racers yet.

Underground taps into car culture's obsession with after-market modifications, letting players apply hundreds of real accessories to 20 licensed hot rods. Aside from excellent visual effects courtesy of the team who brought *The Fast and The Furious* to Hollywood, *Underground* rides a fine line between arcade accessibility and sim-like realism. Unfortunately, as with all of EA's online-enabled titles, *Underground* will not appear on Xbox Live. Boo, hiss.

Club Rubb!



Sharp-eyed fans will note the developers at Maxis have included the greatest homage of all: Club Rubb. For those who don't get the joke, the dance club is named after famed Oakland mechanic Bubba Rubb, whose misadventures are now legend. Check out Club Rubb and learn why the reference is so welcomed by going here: <http://bubbrubb.howheels.org/>



VOODOO VINCE

□ Dev: Beep □ Release: Fall 2003
□ Pub: Microsoft □ Origin: Kirkland, WA

Clayton Kauzlaric of Beep Industries offers the following advice in regards to the kooky Xbox platformer *Voodoo Vince*: "You should buy it."

Kauzlaric's patchwork boy Vince has a strip for a head and torso, and a piece of red felt is stitched over where his heart would be. He has one eye (blue) and one button sewed on where his other orb should be. To the quick: his voodoo is real, but he is not.

The plucky, born-on-the-bayou Vince comes to life after a fortunate accident with zombie dust. Now, on a quest to rescue his maker Madame Charmaine from the villainous Kosmo, the inscrutable Vince gets to explore a series of Louisiana- and supernatural-themed environments, all the while subjecting himself to great tortures in order to hurt his enemies.

A video stranger in a strange land, Vince holds about 30 or so levels and approximately that number of special attacks. In motion, it conjures up images of Tim Schafer's offbeat and seldom-seen *Psychonauts*; its art style is similar, as is its complement of slightly bent dramatic personas.

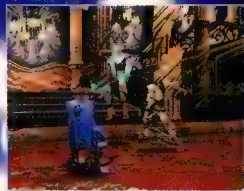
Ordinary attacks, among them a punch and head slam, allow Vince to knock out enemies and collect beads. Beads enable the little voodoo doll to perform special strikes on himself, the effects of which are felt by his foes.

Vince gets pureed in a blender, his enemies turn to pulp; he takes the brunt of an alien air strike, and nearby foes explode. "It's okay to do bad things to Vince," Kauzlaric stresses.

Players will be treated to ample bits of platforming action, suitably challenging puzzles, more than three hours of original music, goofy enemies such as the *Gingerdead Men*, and environments as sweet as a Pixie Stix. Among Vince's stomping grounds are a near-perfect rendition of New Orleans' famed Bourbon Street and a haunted amusement park. Magical!



□ Fun Fact: Hydrogen and fire don't mix. Vince will learn this in short order.



With *Defiance*, developer Crystal Dynamics **offers Kain** **initiates** **more incentive than just story.**





LEGACY OF KAIN: DEFIANCE

Developer: Crystal Dynamics Publisher: Eidos Interactive Expected Release: Fall 2003 Origin: Palo Alto, CA

Defiant to the end, Eidos' purveyor of bloody justice returns for his latest and greatest adventure. Welcome back, Kain.

The *Legacy of Kain* games haven't always been great. To wit, *Blood Omen 2*—the series' last outing on the Xbox—was an endless-to-do list of crate-pushing puzzles and key-fetching errands. What fuels the love for *Kain* fans has more to do with the series' intricate plot continuum underlying each blood-sucking, soul-reaping adventure. Crystal Dynamics' latest vampiric outing, *Legacy of Kain: Defiance* feels much more like *Kain May Cry*. Translation: It's much better than the last *Kain* game.

The story goes a little something like this: Once upon a dark and gothic place known as Nosgoth, vampire general and antihero Kain sacrifices the salvation of his world by choosing to conquer it. What follows is an epic tale of hubris and revenge—one involving Kain's top lieutenant, Raziel, who was banished by Kain to an eternity of bad-tripping on mushrooms in some twisted netherverse for having grown

wings first before his master.

With *Defiance*, developer Crystal Dynamics offers *Kain* initiates more incentive than just story, atmosphere, and the novel ability to play as both Kain and Raziel. This time around, the team is pouring resources into fine-tuning gameplay. Taking a cue from Capcom's *Devil May Cry* on the PlayStation 2, *Defiance* uses switching perspectives that intelligently follow the action, liberating players from camera micromanagement and allowing them to focus on the series' deepest fighting system yet.

Now that series' scenario writer Amy Hennig has taken the backseat as a creative consultant, concentrating on concocting the penultimate *Kain* mind-f*ck, players will note a tangible difference in the pacing and feel of *Defiance*. Like Dante in *Cry*, both Kain and Raziel can knock enemies upwards, follow the assault with a jump, paralyze their foes in midair, then pull and repel them into walls, off

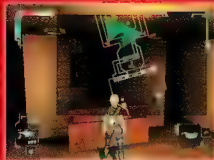


□ The Bad Posture Society met religiously each week until its members all grew humps.

bridges, and into deadly obstacles. The many combo possibilities in *Defiance*, enabled by the game's responsive controls and accomplished sense of overall texture, give this sequel much more urgency than previous installments. Whether the developers can sustain, nurture, and intensify this urgency through the length of a 10-hour adventure, however, is a question best answered by a proper review of the game.

Che Chou

FUTURE
Coming Soon



ROGUE OPS

Dev: Kemco Release: Fall 2003
Pub: Kemco Origin: Bellevue, WA

From the moment Osama Bin Laden thrust terrorism into the limelight some two years back, the subject quickly became prime videogame fodder. Of course, this comes as little surprise; in an industry steeped so heavily in stories of good versus evil (with all respect to Uta Schaefer's forthcoming *Beyond Good and Evil*, certainly), the concept of a righteous hero taking on the unequivocally malicious terrorist threat couldn't be a more natural fit. Suffice it to say, counter-terrorism is the new first-person shooting.

Rogue Ops puts players in control of Nikki Connors, a former Green Beret who has retired from the service and settled into family life. After a terrorist attack takes the lives of her family, Nikki wants—drumroll, please—revenge, and so she's come out of retirement to terminate Omega 19, the terrorist organization responsible for the attack.

The game's heroine Connors follows in the carefully placed footsteps of *Splinter Cell*'s Sam Fisher. In their quest to silently take down legions of enemy soldiers, players will access a number of high-tech devices ranging from night-enhancing goggles to a remote-controlled flying camera. Adrenaline boost packs allows for the requisite quiet-time effect, letting Connors move faster than normal as the world around her slows down for a brief period of time. The game also makes use of a health meter, set above each enemy that slowly begins to fill. Once a kill is begun, you'll have to input a succession of D-pad combos before a timer runs out in order to successfully take out the enemy. The longer you wait and ready yourself, the fewer directions you'll have to land in a short period of time.

It must be said that *Rogue* currently suffers from sloppy controls and some counterintuitive gameplay; whether these problems can be mended and the game translated into a compelling stealth-action hunt before its holiday release still remains to be seen.



□ Nikki Connors is also quite gifted in string sculpture. It's art, dammit!



CALL OF CTHULHU: DARK CORNERS OF THE EARTH

Developer: HeadFirst Publisher: Bethesda Expected Release: 2004 Origin: England

Close the curtains and shoot the dog. H.P. Lovecraft's dark and dangerous Cthulhu Mythos skulks on to Xbox in the form of a creepy-cool first-person adventure.



Help take a bite out of crime by not ripping the tags off of your mattresses.

Somewhere under the radar and between the murky area where hope floats and the skin crawls lies the first-person horror adventure *Call of Cthulhu: Dark Corners of the Earth*. *Earth* brings the works of author H.P. Lovecraft to Xbox. A literature lesson need not ensue here; Lovecraft's tales of suspense and horror have inspired modern-day authors such as Stephen King and given birth to the "Cthulhu Mythos" from which endless new stories—and a certain Xbox game are based.

Hero Jack Walters is, shall we say, a few bananas short of a fruit salad. He's been institutionalized and suicidal after seeing...something. Six years after the incident that put him over the edge, Walters emerges as a gumshoe and takes a case involving the disappearance of Brian Burnham, a grocery clerk. *Earth* launches itself from this point: "[Walters] will only take cases that he believes have a Mythos connection," the game's producer Chris

Gray says. "Imagine [*The X-Files*] Mulder, but without the UFOs and set in the 1920s." As befitting a Lovecraftian hero, Walters' peril in high resolution may not be concluded in the manner of a Disney cartoon. "Most of Lovecraft's protagonists don't live happily ever after," Gray says.

Earth features elements from Lovecraft's *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* and *The Shadow Out of Time*. Players will get to explore such Lovecraftian staples as the Gilman Hotel, Marsh Refinery, and Deep One City. Gray promises environments authentic to the 1920s, as well as some more alien in origin.

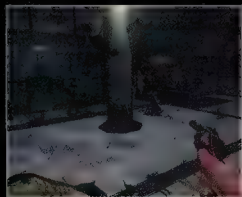
Although it looks like a first-person shooter and, occasionally, quacks in the manner of an FPS, Gray remains hesitant to call it such. "For a start," he says, "there are several sections where the player is completely unarmed and is faced with no other choice but to run for his life. In addition, *Earth* has strong adventuring



Hideous fish-man hybrids want love. Or hot lead. Players can decide at their leisure.

elements that include exploration, investigation, puzzle solving, and character interaction. The horror genre is a popular one for FPS games, but rather than just throwing countless nasty monsters at the player, we are also focusing on building suspense."

To keep things true to life, there will be no heads-up display. As such, players will need to aim along the barrel of whatever gun Walters is using. In addition, there's a semi-realistic system that takes health off whenever the hero



sustains damage. There will also be injuries that cause a continuous drop in health due to loss of blood, and Walters will need to fix these problems with specific health aids. "If Jack has a graze or minor cut then he'll have to apply a bandage, but if the bleeding is more severe then it will need to be stitched up," Gray says. "If a bone has been broken, then a splint will be required. However, it was important to distinguish between realism and playability; the player doesn't need to wait a few months before they can move around on a broken leg."

Gorgeous and creepy, Earth also holds special "insanity effects" such as vertigo and panic that toy with a player's perception; about 10 separate weapons, including an alien "lightning gun;" big monsters ("It wouldn't be a



Earth also holds special "insanity effects" such as **vertigo and panic** that toy with a player's perception.

Lovecraft game without some big monsters," Gray says; and approximately 20 hours of gameplay. It's also being developed for Xbox specifically, so players can expect it to be tuned to a console controller's sensibilities.

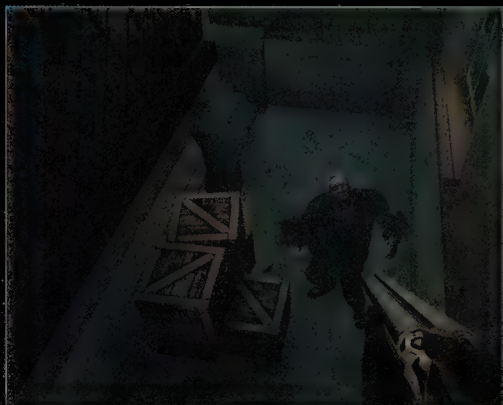
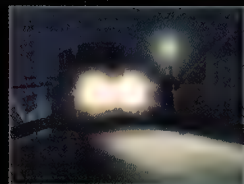
At May's Electronic Entertainment Expo, Bethesda showed off two spectacular scenes from *Earth*. The first had Walters fleeing in terror, unarmed, from some alien threat. Sprinting through the Gilman Hotel, Walters moved from room to room, tossing dressers in front of doors to delay the oncoming and unseen assailant, jumping across balconies, and scrambling to find safety. The second scene, more immediate but no less horrific, saw Walters on a boat under assault from gruesome fish-men. As the ship shook and shuddered with spray flying everywhere, Walters



sought to defend his fellow sailors while simultaneously protecting his own hide. It was potent, scary stuff, a tiny hint of the deadly thrills this game threatens to hold.

Lovecraft's macabre vision as done by developer HeadFirst and publisher Bethesda arrives in 2004. When this *Call* is finally made, it may be hard not to answer it.

Greg Orlando






rarewhere?

When Microsoft bought Rare, it opened Pandora's Box. *Xbox Nation* peers inside to see what this bold move hath wrought.

Words: Evan Shamoon Image: Dino Ignacio

 September 24, 2002. From its annual X02 showcase in Seville, Spain, Microsoft announces to the world that it has paid \$375 million for high-profile Rare, Ltd. The deal is one of the biggest in the history of the games industry, and perhaps the clearest indication yet that Microsoft's commitment to its Xbox game console is steadfast. The move is also both a literal and a symbolic shot across the bow of Nintendo's suddenly rickety ship, as the struggling Japanese console maker has, in one fell swoop, lost what was ostensibly its most pivotal external software developer.

Now, some 10 months after Rare signed its bill of sale, many questions linger. How much creative autonomy does Rare have under Microsoft? How did the developer perceive the reaction—specifically the negative reaction—it received for its games at May's Electronic Entertainment Expo? And most importantly, why is Rare making kids games for what is largely considered to be an older, more sophisticated Xbox audience? *Xbox Nation* sits down with Microsoft's Studio Manager Ken Lobb and unofficial Rare liaison James Veevert to play all three of the studio's announced titles, and perhaps shed some light on these unanswered questions.



A Bit of History

Love it or loathe it, it's difficult to ignore Rare's significance over console gaming's 25-or-so year history. The U.K.-based company, started in 1983 by brothers Chris and Tim Stamper, has been steadily expanding over the years to become one of the industry's most powerful development houses. To include all of its sorted ports and translations, Rare has a staggering 112 PC and console games under its belt. The company so impressed Nintendo's top brass that in 1995,

Nintendo bought a controlling stake in it, effectively representing the first time a Japanese first-party company brought a Western studio directly under its development and publishing wing—not to mention trust one with its most critical, beloved franchises.

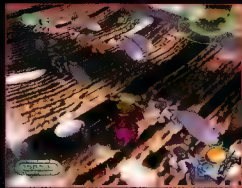
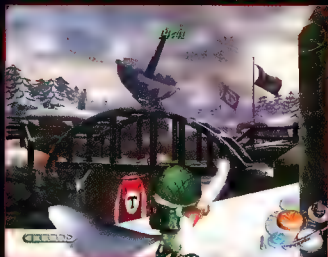
While there is certainly a range of artistic merit within Rare's extensive portfolio, the sheer breadth is peppered with classics. Aside from a host of playable, polished genre titles—from the Nintendo 64 first-person shooter *Perfect Dark* to the NES racing classic *R.C. Pro-Am*—Rare is also responsible for the seminal N64 title *Goldeneye 007*, undoubtedly one of the finest console videogames ever created. Despite some questionable design decisions over the years, Rare games have consistently been technically solid and polished.

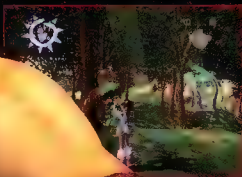
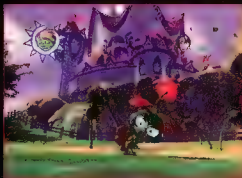
Microsoft noticed. And bought it.

And yet, despite the coup, not all was as rosy as Bill Gates might have hoped. Many in the gaming community sneered at the deal, believing Microsoft had simply wasted too much money for a developer that had already passed its creative prime. Indeed,

the 2002 Rare was clearly not the powerhouse it once was, with many of its finest members having left to form their own companies (Free Radical Design, of *Goldeneye* fame, being the most noteworthy). Rare has also disappointed on all three of its most recent Nintendo titles: *Banjo-Tooie*, an uninspired, rather pedestrian sequel to the developer's *Mario 64*-minded adventure, *Banjo-Kazooie*; *Conker's Bad Fur Day*, a fart-joke- and sexual innuendo-laden third-person shooter heavy on the adolescent humor but light on the innovative gameplay; and *Star Fox Adventures*, a polished but generic exercise in fetch-questing and franchise building that left even Nintendo faithfuls decidedly underwhelmed.

After only a few minutes, it becomes clear that Veevert and Lobb are accustomed to defending their company's mammoth investment. While





■ ProTip: Whatever this plant-thing is doing, don't do it. Aside from hairy palms and hours spent in confession, you will also feel slightly uneasy afterward.

"The Rare-Microsoft relationship is no different than the Rare-Nintendo relationship." —Ken Lobb

XBN's skepticism centers on the fact that Rare's current lineup of games appears entirely out of place on the 18-to-30-something-skewed Xbox, Microsoft seems determined to approach the situation from a broader, essentially argument-deflecting perspective.

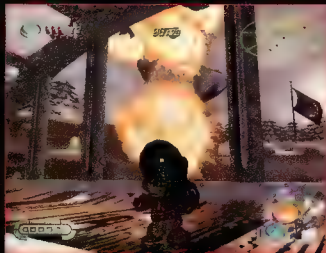
"With *Grabbed By The Ghoules*, Rare realizes it's not necessarily going after the exact, current Xbox demographic," Veevert says. "And that's part of the beauty of Rare—they're able to make games for every audience. The next market for us to really go

after is expanding to that broader audience. And that is why it's fundamental to bring Rare into that mix. Yes, we're definitely gonna be serving the demographic that we currently have, but we're absolutely in a strategy to broaden that out. That's a big part of the business plan." He refers to the fact that *Ghoules* is "definitely" an adventure for 8-to-12-year-olds, but universal enough for everyone. "We know 8-to-12-year-olds are gonna love it—absolutely," Veevert continues. "All the testing that we've done internally, they completely respond to it."

"It's exactly the game that I wanted Rare to do [for their Xbox debut]," says Lobb, who worked directly with Rare for nearly 10 years as a producer at Nintendo. "[In terms of game choices], the Rare-Microsoft relationship is no different than the Rare-Nintendo relationship. In both cases, we let Rare make what they want to make. When they wanted to make a franchise, they came and asked. The company is very, very independent. It was Rare coming to Nintendo and saying, 'We want to make *Dankey Kong*,' and it's Rare coming to Microsoft saying, 'We want to make *Ghoules*, or *Kameo*, or *Perfect Dark*.' You don't tell Steven Spielberg what kind of movies he should make; you don't tell the Stamper brothers what kind of games they should make."

The reality, however, likely exists in a somewhat more practical take on the situation. The truth is that these games were in GameCube development long before Microsoft purchased Rare (aside from *Conker*, which Rare decided to resurrect shortly after the transaction), and it will be some time before any truly Xbox-minded titles begin to see the light of day. For the games coming out now, the company has little choice but to reposition them as "games for a broader audience." They portray the Stamper brothers as humble, heads-down developers ("It's really about their products and not about themselves," Veevert says) who are more interested in making good games than worrying about target audiences and Xbox demographics. While XBN has heard on good account that *Ghoules* came within a single Microsoft meeting of being canceled before its Halloween release, Lobb and Veevert apparently know nothing of the sort.

Perhaps the better question is: Are traditional, please-the-world kiddie games still relevant in the 2003 videogame market? More specifically, for Microsoft, are they \$375 million relevant? To this, Lobb cites Rare's interest in bringing the platform game full circle. "If you look at a game like *Ghoules*, 'growing and expanding' might be part of the prob-



learn with the platform genre. Some developers have been trying to do these [games in which] the control is too complicated, the base idea is too complicated—you can't hand a 5-year-old a lot of the games that are coming out now as platforms and say, 'Here, just play.' If the kid can't read, he can't play. So, some of Rare's philosophy around platformers—or broad content in general—is to make something that's playable, fun. You can pick it up, you can play for 15 minutes and walk away not like, 'Okay I'm starting to understand why this game is fun, and I'm kind of learning how to play it,'—no,

"They're all addicted to Live. Very likely, [Ghoules] will be—at least with the exception of games where it completely doesn't make sense—the last game [Rare makes] without some element of Xbox Live in it." Veevert continues, "Both the Stampers are just so gung-ho and focused that [online] is going to be the future of this console business. Period."

If nothing else, the release of these games should serve as an interesting experiment in alternate history. Titles originally conceived for Nintendo's GameCube will see the light of day on a console that is, ostensibly, selling to a dramatically

"We expect next year's Electronic Entertainment Expo to be a 'Rare' show."

—Ken Lobb

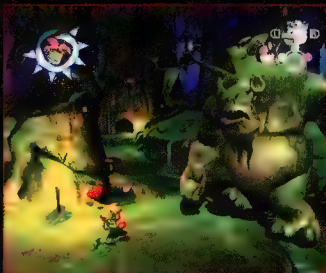
you're [immediately] empowered and strong. It's something that the platform genre was great at in the 16-bit and early 32-bit days. As they became more and more complex, both from a control standpoint and what you're supposed to be doing, I think—and from talking to Rare, they think—that's part of the problem with the genre."

Indeed, it's difficult to say what the future holds for Rare. Whether the developer will stick to its sun-soaked, earnest, fur-laden formula in an effort to broaden the Xbox audience, or if it will eventually refocus its efforts to concentrate on what the modern-day gamer demands—mature content, forward-thinking gameplay, and a more unaffected approach to making videogames—remains to be seen. *Perfect Dark Zero* is on its way, and Microsoft is keen to plug the company's other works in progress, which will be announced in 2004 ("We expect next year's E3 to be a 'Rare' show," Lobb jokes). In terms of direction, the only real hint comes from Lobb, albeit in customarily shrewd fashion.

different audience. Perhaps their success (or lack thereof) will shed some light on Nintendo's current problems, or perhaps, if Microsoft has things its way, it will push Xbox into the homes of families that would have never considered it in the first place. "I don't know the key to success," the great comedian Bill Cosby once said, "but the key to failure is trying to please everybody." ■

Kameo: Elements of Power

Release Date: 2004



■ If nothing else, a little bit of exercise will prevent moss and branches growing on your body.

Although it didn't show well at E3, *Kameo* appears to be perhaps the most intriguing of Rare's Xbox titles. The game exhibits a genuine creative drive, its world immediately smacking of such fantastical realities as those seen in classic Sega and Nintendo titles. Environments are lush, active playgrounds in which protagonist Kameo must capture, grow, and unleash an assortment of monsters to combat ever-present evil, as well as rescue her three elemental ancestors from the unfortunately-named Dark Troll King, who threatens both the planet and its wildlife.

"This isn't a typical Rare platformer in that there aren't many platform-heavy areas," Simon Farmer, a producer at Rare says. "Yes, the player will have to learn new skills all the time with their monsters. Not only do these new skills help the player reach new areas in the game world, but they also have very specific uses in more intense and action-orientated combat scenarios—something we've never really tried as a company before. We want the player to have fun learning the new skills with each new monster they collect. We're sure this is what will drive the player forward—to see what the next monster can do, how it can help their quest,

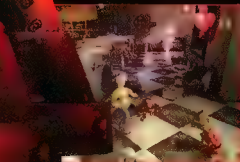
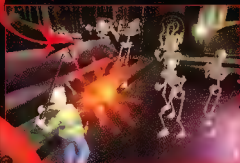
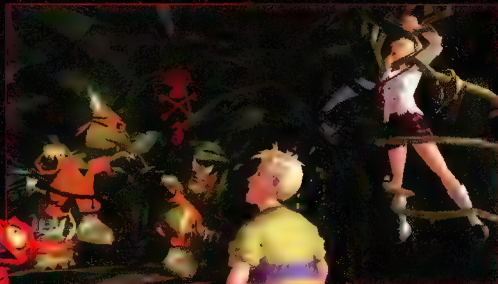
what it can offer in a fight scenario, and how it will differ in its dynamic abilities."

Indeed, the most interesting aspect at work here is the player's ability to control a range of monsters. In our demonstration, an enormous creature made of rocks came under our control, launching the stones that made up its body at enemies until there were none left to throw. "We've tried very hard to give the player total freedom when using their monsters," Farmer continues. "At one stage in development we limited where the player could do certain things with their monsters, but we're now giving the player total freedom to use their monsters any way they see fit. They can explore in complete freedom and they have the freedom of choice when faced with fight scenarios."

"Also, we've tried to make sure that these moves are intrinsically fun to pull off anywhere in the game world. It's good fun speeding around as the armadillo boulder monster. It's even more fun knocking trolls off their feet with it, [or] boosting up skateboard-style ramps and into pipes. The player now has the freedom to do this stuff if they wish. So the 'toy in a sandbox' term does apply to *Kameo* now."

Grabbed by the Ghoulies

Release Date: October 31, 2003



More than perhaps any first-party Xbox game before it, *Grabbed by the Ghoulies* is what one might call "a kids game." It's not necessarily for a lack of solid gameplay or an overwhelming simplicity; rather, it's *Ghoulies'* Scooby Doo-like aesthetics and the decidedly straightforward nature of its design sensibilities that dictate initial first impressions. *Silent Hill*, ladies and germs, this is not.

It is, however, an unpretentious throwback to a bygone era of 16-bit and arcade-style gameplay, rich with monsters to kill, environments to be cleared, and secrets to uncover. *Ghoulies* makes use of an often-ignored dual-analog control scheme: Players use the left stick to control movement, while the right stick controls directional attacks. The game handles well, serving as an effective reminder of what essentially made Rare, the company it is today, it maintains a consistent emphasis on tight controls and simple, strategic gameplay, adhering to the Nintendo-inspired "sandbox" approach to making videogames.

The game presents roughly 100 rooms for its protagonist Cooper to clear. This begins as a fairly simple process—punch, punch, kick, etc.—but the puzzles become significantly varied and complex as one gets deeper into the game. There are more than 100 weapons scattered throughout, ranging from hamburgers to soda can guns to wooden sticks to vicious mini Coopers (known as "miniature Coopers," due to licensing issues), and it's even possible to use enemies to one's advantage when one figures out the correct techniques for

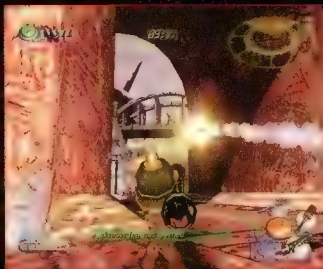
eliciting particular reactions from them. In many ways, the game represents the evolution of the side-scrolling brawler—now with 50 percent more dynamic gameplay and a shiny new coat of Day-Glo paint.

"The aesthetics of a game have little to do with how fun it is," Producer Simon Farmer says. "We try and focus on the content of the game to make sure we have the right blend of humor, action, and challenge that everyone can enjoy. With some careful thought, it is possible to make the same thing appeal to players of different ages in different ways. Younger players will obviously be drawn in by the visuals, but for older players, there is a challenging action-packed experience with an older sense of humor."

Polished and technically savvy, the game certainly looks as close to a Pixar movie as nearly any we've ever seen, with vibrant, polished environments and extremely fluid character animation. Whether its comedic sensibilities will in fact maintain parity with the layered gameplay philosophy, however, remains to be seen. There are certainly enough suitably silly characters, but there's a fine line between subtext-heavy, Simpsons-style comedy and a trip to the local 24-Hour Haunted House 'n' Oyster Bar. Rare's strategy to appeal to all audiences inevitably proves a difficult task, and it requires a great deal of talent and coordination to simultaneously satisfy both a 5-year-old girl and her 21/31/41-year-old father. Look for a comprehensive review next issue.

Conker: Live & Uncut

Release Date: 2004



■ The teddy bear picnic was interrupted briefly when Kimberly served the potato-masher grenades instead of potato salad.

Released on Nintendo 64 in 2001, the original *Conker's Bad Fur Day* represents something of a bold move for Nintendo and its ace second-party developer. A departure from the company's hyper-G-rated legacy, *Conker* sees a curious assortment of rodents engaging in such antisocial behavior as squirrels getting their craniums aerated in a spoof of the Normandy Beach sequence from *Saving Private Ryan*; *Conker* crawling through a pasture of feces to sneak past guards; and the beast of Po Mountain, who can only be defeated with rolls of toilet paper. The humor is juvenile, certainly, but in a medium raised in (and inherently tied to) the rise of political correctness, *Conker* represents something of an ironic fall from grace for the notoriously parent-pleasing console maker. Microsoft apparently saw this subject matter as a perfect fit for Xbox and within weeks of the Rare acquisition, an Xbox Live-focused remake of the game was in production.

Microsoft's Ken Lobb puts it in context from a first-party perspective: "Conker shipped when the N64 was beginning to fade and many of the hardcore fans were either playing the Dreamcast or waiting for the next gen," he says. "It also was pretty aggressive in the mul-

tiplayer design for low-resolution four-player splitscreen play. This team had some great ideas for multiplayer that simply weren't possible on the N64 but are perfect for Xbox Live. As they focus on the Live elements, it was decided that it would be great to include the original game as the single-player element, after being visually and technically brought up to date.

"I'm positive that this game will really impress players with just how much there is to the Xbox Live experience. The single player game will also impress players with crystal-clear resolution and with excellent framerate."

A brief sit-down with one of the game's multiplayer levels proves fairly entertaining. If a bit predictable, although still rough around the edges, the furry third-person deathmatch does provide a nice escape from the monochrome hallways of *Quake III* and its clones. On display was an impressive user-guided missile launcher, and in the final version players will be able to pilot helicopters, tanks, and other sorted heavy, death-dealing machinery. Expect an assortment of weapons, movie spoofs, and liberal use of the phrase "bend over, assface" when the game ships next year.

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Ologi: Myth of Demons

How we rate

Being a single-format magazine, we at *Xbox Nation* find ourselves in the difficult situation of critiquing games which reside on Xbox, while not blinding ourselves to the sphere of console gaming surrounding it. We will make a point to put each game in context of both its platform and videogames at large, whenever possible.

Our scale is a rigid one to 10; in an industry where the independent spirit is often kicked maliciously to the curb, and games are often prematurely rushed out the door in the name of quarterly earnings, we believe it's an important time to be critical. And while the burden certainly weighs heavily upon our shoulders as reviewers, it is infinitely heavier on the consumers' backs. In this day of shallow profit

margins, wallets speak volumes. Allow us to break it down for the folks in the cheap seats: One is video feces. Two is trash. Three is junk. Four is sub-par. Five is average. Six is slightly above. Seven is very solid. Eight's a real gem. Nine is amazing. Ten is *Halo*.

Our most important requirement is that a game bring something new to the table. And yet, while innovative forms of interaction come first, we don't scoff at technology so cutting edge it makes our noses bleed or gameplay that refines a pre-existing formula into something so supple it bleeds itself, either. Titles failing to distinguish themselves in one of these crucial ways are—in our opinion—quite easily dismissed, especially at 50 bucks a pop.

REVIEWING THE REVIEWS

Xbox Nation: Now with more sass, less verve

For a long time, the Xbox lineup has been most sorely lacking in two vital areas:

RPGs and fighting games. And it took nearly two full years for this problem to be resolved. But now, seemingly out of nowhere, Xbox finds itself with what may very well be the best either genre has to offer.

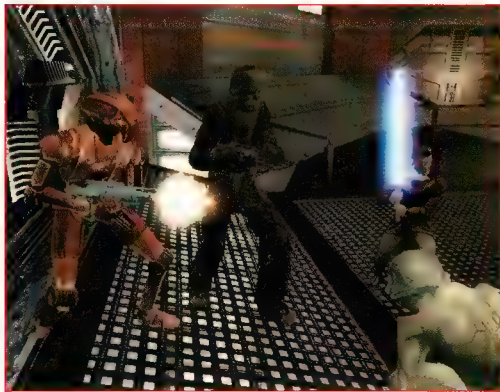
Soul Calibur II is the most elegant version of the deepest fighting system ever conceived, sporting cleaner graphics and a stunning 720P HDTV mode to push it beyond its multiformat contenders. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, for the handful of Xbox owners who don't already know (the game

has already sold 400,000 copies, and set initial sales records as the fastest-selling Xbox game of all time), combines BioWare's uncanny ability to create enormous gameworlds with the rich universe of *Star Wars*, and the result is easily the best Western console RPG ever to grace a console.

Sega's *Otagi* is beauty made digital, while *The Simpsons Hit & Run* brings genuine comedy to what has generally been a tragically wasted videogame license. *Madden 2004* evolves video football yet again, *Dynasty Warriors 4* brings with it 38% more killing, and *NHL Hitz Pro* and *Freedom Fighters* both add fuel to Xbox's fire.

STAR WARS: KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC

Xbox Nation doesn't like sand. It's rough and scratchy. This game is not like sand.



■ Droids and wookies fight alongside Jedi disciples in *Knights of the Old Republic's* innovative combat system, which combines real-time movement with turn-based strategizing.



■ It took an eight-hour exorcism to purge the evil Jedi of their Boogie Fever.

Jolee Bindo, Cool!



Old coot Jolee Bindo can be found on the forest planet of Kashyyyk. Help this geriatric Jedi with a problem he's having (thankfully, it's not bowel-related) and he'll gladly join in the fight against Dark Malak, scourge of the universe. He's a handy man to have around, if a bit prone toward rambling "In my day,..."

"You haven't figured it out yet?" the metal-jawed fiend Malak bellows at one point during the brilliant Xbox RPG *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*. What follows, simply, blows away Darth Vader's stunning revelation at the end of *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*; Vader may be Luke's father, but *Knights*, well, the DNA results are in and the evidence is conclusive. *Knights* is Star Wars' daddy. In every sense of the word.

Hyperbole does not begin to hint at *Knights*' simple genius. The game brings the Star Wars universe, 4,000 or so space years before *A New Hope*, to life on Xbox, complete with larger-than-life heroes, twisted villains, bounty hunters, bloated Hutts, droids, and incomprehensible Jawas. There are light sabers, hyperdrive engines, Gaffi sticks, Mandalorian helmets, thermal detonators, and blaster pistols. Scenery exists in the form of huge sandcrawlers, a primitive yet well-guarded Sand People outpost, landspeeders, rusted-out hulks, a gorgeous city built on top of an ocean planet. There are Rontos, Banthas, Rancors. There is the dark and there is the light. There is corruption. And there is salvation.

Best of all, there is both humanity here and real human emotion. The Twi'lek Mission Vao totes around a

giant wookiee not only for protection, but because she thinks the big oaf would be helpless without her. She dotes on her brother, despite the fact he abandoned her, ran off with a dancer and, in the parlance of the common man, is a shiteel. Haughty Jedi Bastia doesn't open her mouth but to warn her companions of the evils of the dark side, totally oblivious to the fact she might one day be consumed by it. Even the cold-hearted assassin droid HK-47 emerges as a smart, funny, fully developed character, perhaps even the finest homicidal robotic sidekick ever to be included in any RPG to date.

At its heart, *Knights* holds the notion that the player should create his or her own hero. This, of course, includes selecting the central character's

characteristics, initial career, and appearance. Customization options are many and varied; players can opt to become a soldier, scout, or scoundrel with appropriate skills and feats. It's possible to develop a computer hacker, a stealthy sneak, a weapons expert, or a smooth, charismatic sort, and at all times *Knights* lets players tailor their characters to suit their individual needs. As Jedi, players can become heroes or hellraisers, and *Knights* even alters a character's appearance to reflect his alignment.

Knights provides the sandbox. Players shape the sand, making moral

The DNA results are in and the evidence is conclusive: ***Knights* is Star Wars' daddy.**

Dev: BioWare
Pub: LucasArts
Players: 1
Star: Soars
Origin: Canada
Online: Yes



■ Two more good things about *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* are its decided lack of moppets and also its unsandlike quality. Remember, sand is rough and scratchy!

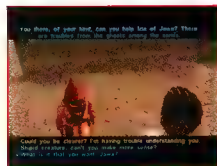
choices throughout. Is it better to kill a giant shark by poisoning it or placate it by smashing the machinery that's driving it nuts? Is the crazy woman with the robot she's deluded herself into thinking is her husband worthy of getting said automaton back after the thing runs away? What about the supersecret organization whose goals are in line with those of the Republic, but that routinely sponsors assassination missions?

The game forces players to choose, to make a stand, and then live with the consequences. In doing so, *Knights* emerges as a morality play, one that offers players paths which are not always clear-cut. It poses questions to the player: Can you save a blackened soul? How much power can a person wield before it corrupts him? Is it better

HK-47: Your Assassin Droid Pal



Hunter Killer-47 is truly your assassin droid pal. Players get to purchase HK on Tatooine, and he's worth his weight in comedy gold. Alternately calling humanoids "meatbags" and casually offering to slaughter any NPC the protagonist talks to, old HK hearkens back to such beloved and/or psychotic robots as Mechagodzilla, Gort, the Cylons, Bender, Megatron, and former U.S. President Richard M. Nixon.



■ **ProTip:** Aliens and people from foreign countries often speak strange gibberish that's not English. Remember to speak loudly and slowly so as to be understood.

to use the open hand or the clenched fist? What do you do when the facts damn a comrade and might possibly send him to his death? Make no bones about it; *Knights* provides something no other console game does—the chance to form a character through specific actions. PC games have done this for years, but *Knights'* singular ability to let players create their own character and imbue him with a personality—to *truly* shape who he is and how he's perceived by others—is absolutely unique.

Combat, a surprisingly solid mix of real-time action and turn-based strategy, allows players to attack specific targets; strike with ranged, thrown, or melee weapons; employ Force powers; or use items such as healing packs and stimulants. The fighting plays out in real-time, but can be paused to allow players to issue commands. Thus, it's possible to have a largely arcade-like experience, a wholly strategic one, or a combination of the two. Graphically, though its visuals are hardly the greatest ever seen, *Knights* manages to convey a wonderful sense of space and majesty; BioWare, for example, serves up Tatooine as a near-empty wasteland, its vast void more than hammering home the fact that this world is deadlier than former president Woodrow Wilson.

As an RPG, *Knights* provides all the trappings while simultaneously avoiding the most-hated elements of the genre's former king *Final Fantasy*—specifically, its unavoidable and random monster battles. Players are flooded with weapons and items; nine separate slots on a character's body can be filled with everything from implants to eyepieces. It's possible to modify lightsabers by adding exotic crystals to their hilts, don cheeky garb such as a Sand People's costume, and wield two weapons at once. With much enthusiasm, *Knights* pushes the geek factor into the red, and does so unabashedly.

Play, though linear, is cleverly littered with lots of side quests so as to make the game appear anything but. Podracing challenges test a player's reflexes. The card game *Pazaak* presents opportunities to use the old cerebrum to earn valuable credits. There's an honest-to-God murder mystery to solve, a defendant in a murder case to defend, and gigantic beasts that demand slaying. All of it serves to hook the player and greatly extend gameplay without seeming at all tacked-on. *Knights* leads



■ **Fun Fact:** George Lucas originally wanted to call the original *Star Wars* *The Stinktastic Third-Dimensional Adventures of Chubby, Earl, and Oklahoma Pete*.

In terms of story, depth, and simple humanity, *Knights* is the best Xbox has to offer.

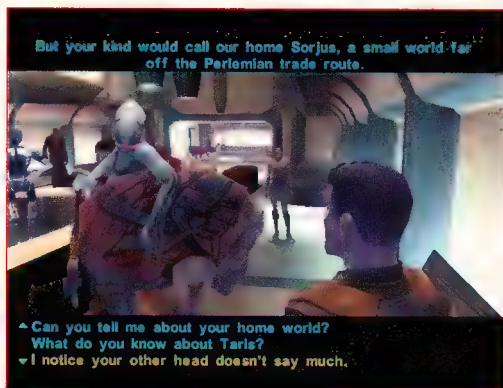
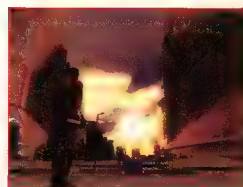
players by the hand with grace and charm, letting them branch off and explore at their leisure. The game's grand story serves as great motivation to move toward what is, undoubtedly, a cacophonous finale.

The game sprawls, oozes charm, throws up brain-twisting puzzles providing great challenge. It takes players across the galaxy to seven different worlds, including Kashyyyk and the Sith homeworld Korriban, as well as two other space-based locations. All told, it's smart and funny, with dialogue that's professionally written and, with some exceptions, skillfully delivered by talented voice actors. Plot points emerge through conversation as often as they do calamitous events; players are encouraged to talk to every person

they encounter and are suitably rewarded for their efforts. At nearly every turn the presentation reeks of careful effort and forethought, and the whole, simply, is near flawless. Save, of course, for the unfortunate flaws.

Almost perfect, *Knights* stumbles but never really falls. Its framerate sometimes sputters when multiple enemies attack a player's three-man party. There are glitches, most notably when a character's head disappears for short periods of time, or when an invisible character fails to reappear.

A PC-style game brought to Xbox, *Knights'* does not move or behave exactly as a console game does; its emphasis is on story and character development and not necessarily on making its enormous cast look



drop-dead gorgeous. This, at least partially, puts the glitches and other small sticking points into context.

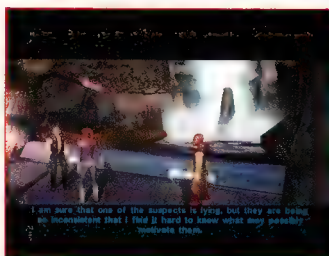
Yet these small potholes do not detract significantly from *Knights'* greatness. Players will excuse, and perhaps even dismiss, any such problems on their great march to the end. Like the characters it presents, *Knights* is innately human. It has flaws. Still, the last of its great strengths is that it succeeds, and magnificently so, in spite of them.

For a long time, Xbox has suffered from a dearth of quality RPGs. No longer, *Knights* raises the bar for RPGs and for console games in general. In terms of story, depth, and simple humanity, it is the best Xbox has to offer. Arguably, it is Xbox's best game since *Halo*. Undeniably, it is enough to make the heart soar.

Bravissimo.

Greg Orlando

Murder on Dantooine!



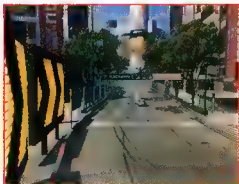
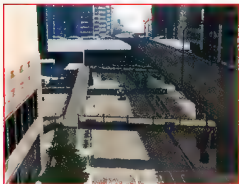
Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic features the most offbeat puzzle of all—a murder mystery. On the planet of Dantooine, players will encounter a dead body, a jogger, a hunter, a droid and a Jedi playing detective. Players will have to interview suspects, weigh evidence, and piece together the circumstances involving this very suspicious and curious death like like Sherlock Holmes. With a lightsaber.

Nine out of Ten

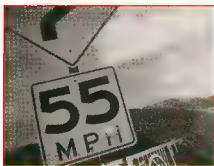
GROUP-S CHALLENGE

Capcom hits a few speed bumps on its way to the track

Dev: Capcom
Pub: Capcom
Players: 1-2
Test drive: Before you buy
Origin: Japan
Online: No



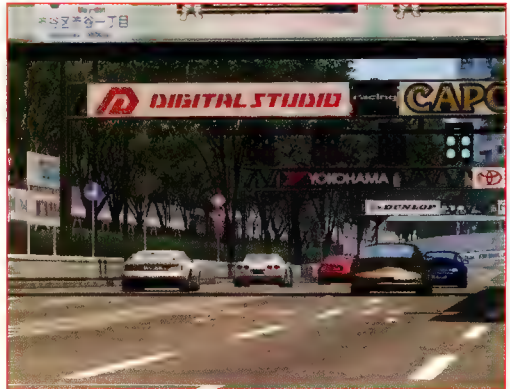
■ *Challenge* is undeniably competent when it comes to detailed cars and city environments.



Speed kills. And no one knows this better than Capcom. To truly simulate the real-life driving experience, *Group-S Challenge* ensures that players travel at speeds no greater than 55 mph—for maximum safety precautions. The amazing thing is, even as the speedometer redlines at 120 mph, the game cruises at a leisurely 55.

Blame it on Polyphony Digital's next-generation racing sim *Gran Turismo 3* on PlayStation 2, or *Project Gotham Racing* and *Sega GT* on Xbox. Heck, attribute it to just plain driving our cars every day to work and back—but no matter how you cut it, realistic racing games have reached a creative dead end which no amount of photorealism can rightly amend. In an apparent buckshot strategy to capture every major segment of console publishing, Capcom has released *Group-S Challenge*, a racer it romanticizes as the perfect *Turismo* stopgap to fill the Xbox's gaping void of a sim racing killer app.

Only, there isn't a void—at least not one as dire as what game publishers would like us to believe. Recent driving games such as *Burnout 2* and *Midtown Madness 3* have shown us the road to automotive salvation lies not with photorealism, or even licensed cars, but rather environmental interaction and game design. Further evidence of developers hurdling the creative impasse created by pure realism are online racers such as *Midnight Club 2*, *Sega GT Online* (see the preview on page 56), and the frantic, physics-based wrecklessness of *Grand Theft Auto III*. This welcome wave of post-realistic racers eschews dry reproduction of "real life" to give drivers all-out escapism fun.



■ *Group-S Challenge* offers real-life cars with real-time reflections running in real-life locales. Welcome to 2001.

The game languishes somewhere between hardcore sim and fluffy arcade thrills.

Which is why *Challenge* feels dated and underwhelming in 2003. There isn't anything here that surpasses what publishers have been spoon-feeding console players for years. What really disappoints is *Challenge's* half-assed feel, with the game lan-

guishing somewhere between hardcore sim and fluffy arcade thrills. *Challenge* isn't deep nor long enough to oust *Sega GT* or *Gotham Racing* from their slightly raised pedestals; nor does it pack the adrenaline that speed junkies crave. The list of omissions is epic: decent A.I., car damage, real-life car parts, an in-dash view, analog gas and brake buttons—and, well, you get the point.

Some would argue that, taken on its own merits, and without comparison to the hundreds of racing games already on Xbox, *Challenge* is nothing if not a technical achievement. Those pundits reside in a fantasy world where opinions aren't somehow fueled by the almighty dollar—a magical land where, despite dropping \$50 on a mediocre new racer, gamers will take the time to rationalize, or even justify, *Challenge's* latent role in filling the Xbox's imaginary *Turismo* vacuum.

Sorry, but much like the best of the racing console games of late, that simply isn't realistic.

Che Chou



■ If *Group-S Challenge* were a song by bloated rocker Meat Loaf, it would be titled, "Caution: Objects in the rear-view mirror are darker than they appear."

Four out of Ten

DYNASTY WARRIORS 4

Dev: Koei
Pub: Koei
Players: 1-2

Dynasty: For All
Origin: Japan
Online: No



■ The Unbearable Lightness of Zhou You was only in theaters for one day. Ninety-six people were permanently blinded.

Despite Koei's concerted efforts to veil it, the ancient Chinese secret held within *Dynasty Warriors 4* is: X, X, X. Its old slashfest with the new version number relies almost exclusively on one controller button tapped ad nauseam, but still, beneath *Warriors'* simple exterior lies a game of substantial depth.

As a Chinese soldier, players are tossed into the middle of a battle and forced to sink or swim. Players can pick and choose where they want to go on a battlefield, attacking an enemy army's weak spots and crippling its hierarchy by defeating its officers. The game excels at overloading the game-play screen with enemies and overloading players' senses; the adrenaline fed charges, the harried retreats to gather one's wits or find health restoratives, the manic glee of killing 'em all and letting Jahweh sort 'em out the game inspires are like some divine pudding. Its unrelenting, breathless skirmishes exhilarate the mind and exhaust the hands.

Warriors expands on an already solid formula with one-on-one officer



duels, an edit mode that lets players create their own heroes and bodyguards, siege weapons, and weapons that improve as the hero gains experience. For Xbox, Koei has also tacked on Dolby 5.1 support. To the point: *Warriors* is fantastic, and not even its flaws, notably, slowdown when ene-

mies choke the screen and pop up of random objects on the horizon, spoil the beautiful brawling.

Greg Orlando

Eight out of Ten

GREAT ESCAPE

Dev: Pivotal Games Pub: Gotham Games Players: 1 Escape: From Xbox Origin: England Online: No

It's a great idea on paper: cash in on the sizzling-hot WWII craze by licensing a classic flick about POWs in a Nazi prison camp. Unfortunately, this game quickly strays into *Hogan's Heroes* territory, with comically stupid enemy A.I. and an endless string of overfamiliar formulas and clichés. Great stealth games such as *Metal Gear Solid* and *Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell* give you an array of tools and a myriad of options imparting an exhilarating sense of freedom. *The Great Escape*, however, is quite suffocatingly linear. It sends you tiptoeing around on an endless string of rote fetch-and-deliver missions.

Vast swaths of the movie turn up as in-game cut-scenes. But character models and textures are mediocre at best, undercutting the cinematic effect. Interior locales are sterile and empty, with a dearth of interactive elements. Exteriors are often expansive, but slooooooowly sneaking through miles and miles of Bavarian forests can be excruciating.

Thankfully, *Escape* mixes some passable action in with the tedious



■ The dance team of El Guapo and Sir Chokesalot was doomed from the very start.

stealth chases, shootouts, and sequences that let you commandeer machine gun turrets, or cool vehicles such as armored personnel carriers. And the game ultimately rewards anyone who's slogged through to the end with a surprisingly enjoyable recreation of Steve McQueen's climactic motorcycle escape from the movie. Despite some control wonkiness, the *Evel Knievel*-esque finale makes the game an enjoyable rental for fans of the film.

Chris Baker

Five out of Ten

DINOTOPIA: THE SUNSTONE ODYSSEY

Dev: Vicious Cycle Pub: TDK Mediactive Players: 1 Utopia: Nowhere Origin: Chapel Hill, NC Online: No

James Gurney's *Dinotopia*, which postulated an island commune where humans and dinosaurs live in harmony, was a fine coffee-table book. The Xbox game based thereupon has no such redeeming qualities. A green plastic case isn't much as a living-room ornament, leaving *Dinotopia: The Sunstone Odyssey* more or less bereft of value.

There are worse games than this on the market, but they're bad because they have ambition, and fall while reaching for it. *Dinotopia's* only ambition is to be bland and inoffensive.

This is action at its most basic (see the enemy, press A, repeat) and adventure at its most boring (fetch widget and return to random towns-person). It takes place in linear, pastel worlds so repetitive that you can turn 180 degrees while battling an opponent, head back the way you came, and not realize your mistake for several minutes. It controls well enough, if only because you don't ever have to do anything very complicated, but the camera hangs up badly whenever the level architecture gets even



■ The Village People contemplated yet another comeback, time one on an ice cap.

remotely ambitious.

After several successive quests revolving around collecting fruit for lazy *Dinotopians*, you'll wonder why you're helping these people, given they're a bunch of crybabies incapable of fending for themselves. Their existence would best be served by a catastrophic, hippy-swallowing event. Alas, *Dinotopia's* creators never contemplated such a possibility—or, if they did, they kept it to themselves.

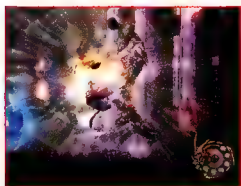
David Smith

Three out of Ten

OTOGI: MYTH OF DEMONS

This ain't no Brothers Grimm fairy tale

Dev: From Software
 Pub: Sega
 Players: 1
 Ain't: No Succubus here
 Origin: Japan
 Online: No



■ With a well-timed swing of his +5 Vorpal Blade of Beheading, supernatural tough guy Raikoh can knock projectiles back at his foes.

Third-person action games are a tricky business. After releasing two promising and innovative action titles (*Gunvalkyrie* and *Shinobi*, on Xbox and PlayStation 2, respectively) to lukewarm reception, Sega's finally hit the jackpot with *Otoi: Myth of Demons*. Developed by From Software, whose last Xbox project was the disappointing mech-pursuit adventure *Murakumo*, *Otoi* is a fantastic, nightmarish trip through an ancient Japanese dreamscape.

Players control Raikoh, a deceased warrior who's brought out of spiritual purgatory by a mysterious deity who hails only by the menacing moniker "Princess." Raikoh's task is straightforward but never simple; most missions have some self-contained twist players must discover in order to beat the level. Interim peaks in the game come from facing off against various minibosses strewn throughout.

To give *Otoi* that proper fairy tale mystique, the game's designers spared no artistic expense when it came to rendering the 25 gorgeous locales players will explore (and subsequently decimate). These slick, organic environments aren't just pretty to look at. Many structures and objects also yield valuable power-ups for Raikoh, and it's literally the player's God-given duty to smash as many of these antiques as possible.

Otoi is an excellent and well-paced



■ Eight hits, oddly enough, is seven more than singer Don "American Pie" McLean had. Even more odd, it's eight more hits than pathetic comedy act "Chunky A" had.

Playing the role of the reckless right hand of God becomes **nothing less than an addictive ego trip.**

action experience simply because the act of swinging (and combo-ing) Raikoh's 15 exotic weapons is supremely fun. The game takes into account factors such as weapon weight and type to generate melee outcomes that are as spectacular as

they are satisfying.

As with any action title, *Otoi* can become repetitive, but because the game allows players to dispatch their enemies in any number of wicked ways—smack an enemy into the ground and watch as the landscape craters in real-time—the repetition never gets old. Thanks in large part to *Otoi*'s near-flawless camera and control system, playing the role as the reckless right hand of God becomes nothing less than an addictive ego trip.

For replay value and depth, *Otoi* offers players the option to revisit completed levels, not only for the thrill of returning as a more formidable warrior, but also to collect bounty and experience points to further growth and upgrades. Even more inventive is the fact that levels which are laid to waste stay wasted. Nearly everything about *Otoi*, from its art direction to its intricately balanced game design, is infused with careful thought, consideration, and much love.

Che Chou

Otoi is the boss of you



When it comes to epic boss battles, *Otoi* steps up and fulfills expectations. Less than a third of the way through, players face off against an enormous flying centipede. Then a few stages later, it's time to scrap with the king of bird demons. And that's nothing compared to what awaits at level 25. Go ahead, kill your boss.



■ Garfield's litter pan hadn't been changed in three years and that idiot Jon forgot to buy the lasagna. It's revenge, kitty style. And this time, it's personal!

Eight out of Ten

DISNEY'S EXTREME SKATE ADVENTURE

Dev: Toys For Bob Pub: Activision Players: 1 Woody: Hawk Origin: Novato, CA Online: No

Under the strict legal doctrine of "Liar, Liar, Pants On Fire," the jury has judged Activision guilty as charged. Its new game *Disney's Extreme Skate Adventure* possesses all the extremeness of napping kittens.

The game fuses Mouse House ideas and characters with the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* engine. Buzz Lightyear can tear along through Andy's Room, Pizza Planet, and Zurg's World; Timon and Pumbaa can assault the Elephant's Graveyard, and so on. The themed environments, cramped and colorful, feature endless rails to grind, platforms to jump and cross, and collectible items. Bit players such as Hamm and the little green men from *Toy Story* offer special challenges to the player, asking them to snatch up a certain point score, unlock items by performing tricks on them, and so on. It's an old dog wearing a cute new hat.

Still, it works, and works very well. There's nothing to complain about in terms of the game's controls or its trick system; they've been tuned to perfection. There's an awful lot of fun to be had here and plenty of replay opportu-



■ Timon and Pumbaa give new meaning to the term "Nose Grind." Hah!

nities. Secret areas can be opened up by players keen enough to hunt for them, and unlockable items pop up almost every time a mission has been completed. A solid and rocking soundtrack anchors the package.

Meant for children, *Adventure* offers challenges that seem perhaps too hard for its target audience. Oftentimes, missions need to be completed under strict time deadlines, and the kiddies may have trouble skating along.

Greg Orlando

Seven out of Ten

TETRIS WORLDS

Dev: Radical Entertainment Pub: THQ Players: 1-4 Worlds: Of Wonder Origin: Canada Online: Yes

Wacky themed backdrops, particle effects, and irritating techno drivel was what Radical Entertainment and THQ brought to the franchise when *Tetris Worlds* was released in 2002. One year later brings a reissue of that very same package (now \$19.99), in an attempt to give it new life. Or in this case, a new Live.

Players can bring their hard-nosed *Tetris* game to Xbox Live and compete against an entire legion of whiny, faceless block manipulators who are likely playing with the "performance enhancements" turned on. It's possible to go online against a foe who's using a feature that shows him an outline of where a piece will land once dropped, another option lets him manipulate a piece that's already resting atop another—there's even a "hold" function allowing him to save a piece for when it's most needed. When playing online, there is no way to know if an opponent is using one or more of these.

The Live features mark the only design difference between this and last year's version, as this one retains the six play modes, graphical enhance-



■ Fun puzzle game? Or Soviet play to rule the world? You decide

ments, and support for custom soundtracks.

At its core, it's *Tetris*. Fans of this seminal game will revel in some of the enhancements, and the online play does supply fleeting moments of glee for fans and newcomers alike. However, it should be noted that no matter how many coats of polish they put on it, this is still the same game that's been around since Mikhail Gorbachev ruled the Soviet Union.

Russell Garbutt

Six out of Ten

AQUAMAN: BATTLE FOR ATLANTIS

Dev: TDK Mediactive Pub: TDK Players: 1 Why? Just for the halibut? Origin: Calabasas, CA Online: No

Let's face it, Aquaman has always been the Art Garfunkel of the underseas set. The power to speak to the fishies hardly puts you in the class of Superman, after all. With that in mind, then, it comes as no surprise that *Aquaman: Battle for Atlantis* is a subpar effort marred by weak graphics and terribly repetitive gameplay.

The story—which unfolds via comic-book panels rather than animated cut-scenes—revolves around classic Aquaman foe Black Manta returning to subjugate Atlantis. Sadly, the story is rendered moot thanks to the gameplay, which consists of swimming around the drab, seemingly uninhabited undersea city looking for small clusters of bad guys to punch.

Combat in *Aquaman* is simple. Just mash away at the punch buttons until the bad guys croak. Combo attacks are purportedly available, but accessing them is virtually impossible thanks to a camera that constantly revolves around the action. What's more, some combos require mind-bending stretches of button taps that are nearly impossible to pull off. Aquaman,



■ Fun Fact: Aquaman lost his hand to ravenous, hand-eating piranha.

master of aquatic life, can also command a fish to take care of an enemy, but for some reason, his solitary superpower is limited to three uses per level.

Interspersed between the hand-to-hand combat levels are four submarine stages that break up the punching. It's uncertain why the King of the Seas needs to pilot an undersea vessel, but these scenes do shake things up a bit. Unfortunately, it's too little to make *Aquaman* an enjoyable game.

Mark Daniels

Three out of Ten

SX SUPERSTAR

Dev: Climax Pub: AKA Acclaim Players: 1-2 SX: SXXX Origin: England Online: No

To paraphrase Homer J. Simpson paraphrasing Al Pacino: In America, first you get the motorcycle. Then you get the power. Then you get the women.

SX Superstar lets players become celebrities: winning motorcycle races and trick contests; collecting mad endorsement checks for whoring out parts of their rider's body as ad space; and trading that butt-ugly cake eater for a fine, fresh specimen of female pulchritude. But be warned: Journalist A.J. Benza was not far off when he quipped, "Fame. Ain't it a bitch?"

Bells and whistles be damned. *Superstar* offers motorcycle racing the way the ancient Spartans would have done it. Options in *Superstar's* Career mode are minimal: players can accept endorsements, buy new bikes, filter through phone and fax messages, and compete in optional races.

Superstar offers arena races, Baja-style contests, trick competitions, and uphill challenges. None of these are particularly exciting, nor are they hard to beat. The game also features dreadful pseudo-rock tunes, weather effects



■ This *SX Superstar* was soon to become known as Eddie "The Human Accordion" Wilkes.

that have seemingly no impact on the proceedings, and a third-person perspective done so poorly a player's rider will oftentimes be obscured by competitors approaching from the rear. Developer Climax, maker of the fine *MotoGP* and its sequel, seems to be asleep at the handlebars here, as it's cranked out something that's competent, but nonetheless the racing-game equivalent of shaved, unflavored ice served in a wooden bowl.

Greg Orlando

Five out of Ten

SOUL CALIBUR II

The soul, the soul, the soul is on fire. We don't need no water...



■ *Soul Calibur 2* uses a new technique for blending animations, which makes the transitions between moves even more convincingly smooth than they were in the Dreamcast original.

For years, fighting-game heavyweight Namco faced the unenviable task of creating a follow-up to its Dreamcast masterpiece, *Soul Calibur*. Having already crafted what's arguably the best fighting game of all time, the stage was set for Namco to disappoint its audience with a sequel, regardless of the game's quality.

After all, how does one top a game that single-handedly set new standards in the 3D fighting domain? Plagued by this, Namco's choice was both obvious and strategic: Don't fix what ain't broke. Rather than overhaul an already extensive melee system, *Soul Calibur II*—a sprawling successor four years in the making—refines the series' impossibly deep gameplay mechanic. The result is a peerless Xbox fighter relying more on depth and features this time around, as opposed to shocking its audience into submission with an array of groundbreaking visuals.

Combatants returning to Namco's gorgeous stage of history will be immediately familiar with *Calibur II*'s ebb and flow. As one of 23 different bruisers roaming a fictitious continent in the 16th century, players wield an assortment of exotic weapons and embark on a quest to hunt down a pair of mythical swords.

Certainly, *Calibur II*'s list of rich single-player features will not disappoint. Newly implemented solo challenges, such as the Weapon Master quest (where players embark on a lengthy journey to unlock hidden bonuses), or the game's Time Attack, Survival, and Team Battle modes, will occupy lonesome pugilists for weeks as they master an encyclopedia of moves and summon a world of suffering for A.I. opponents. There's a ton to see and do in *Calibur-land*.

Delving deeper into the world of *Calibur II*, unearthing its convoluted web of origins, plot twists, and character alliances will inevitably lead to the conclusion that—while the character designs here are flashy enough to entice newcomers to the fray—true *Calibur* fans will stay for the game's intuitive fighting system.

Unlike most 3D fighters (including Xbox mainstay *Dead or Alive 3*), *Calibur II*'s melee system isn't so much an elaborate re-creation of the canned rock-paper-scissors-style gameplay as



■ This is a rather sticky situation, isn't it? Weapon Master Kilik, a proponent of the carrot-and-stick motivational technique, forgot to bring the vegetables.

It's a vast metaphysical playground giving players **unprecedented freedom** to create their own styles.

It is a vast metaphysical playground giving players unprecedented freedom to create their own deadly techniques.

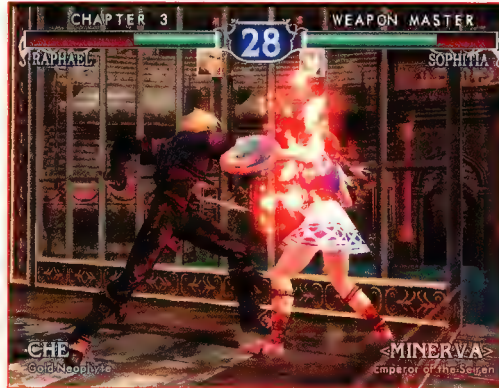
Within the confines of the game's various rules—dealing with everything from the outcome of weapons clashing based on weight and mass to the swirl and timing of each attack—players seemingly create their own offensive style, mixing equal parts motion and ingenuity. Everything simply flows.

Calibur II's combat dynamics are never more evident than in the series' trademark Guard Impact system, whereby fighters deflect or repel

attacks to break the rhythm of an opponent's onslaught. The Guard Impact system is ingenious for two reasons. First, it allows the defender to suddenly turn the tide of the fight, provided he pulls off impeccable timing; second, deflecting a blow feels just as intuitive as any other move in the game, making *Calibur II* as instinctive as it is cerebral.

There's very little *Calibur II* does wrong. If anything, the game is guilty of not revolutionizing the fighting genre like its revered predecessor. Understandably, even sporting

Dev: Namco
Pub: Namco
Players: 1-2
Sell: Your Soul
Origin: Japan
Online: No



■ Todd McFarlane's Spawn is exclusive to the Xbox version of *Soul Calibur II*. He can shoot necroplasm, whack his foes with an ax, and impress all who stand against him with his one big call.

improved graphics over its previous outing, the game carries much less visual impact now than it did on Dreamcast back in 1999.

As well, the inclusion of more complex level and background geometry featuring walls and interactive 3D structures also means that *Calibur II* suffers from occasional glitches in the matrix when player models get stuck on random corners and edges.

Even so, the game still stands, round-to-round, minute-by-minute, not just as the best value for an Xbox owner's dollar, but also as the best fighting game—period—on any system for the foreseeable future.

Che Chou

Master Your Weapon

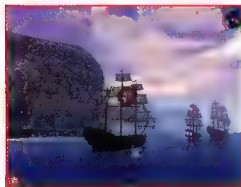


To quell the thirst of socially dysfunctional fighting fans who lack friends, *Soul Calibur II*'s Weapon Master mode adds a layer of narrative and context to single-player proceedings. Going through this 10- to 15-hour exercise unlocks a fleet of goodies, as well as returning characters such as Lizardman, Sophitia, Seung Mina, and Yoshimitsu from the last game. Get ready to kiss your weekend goodbye.

PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN

How to put the "irate" in "pirate" without even trying...

Dev: Akella
Pub: Bethesda
Players: 1
Rated: RRRGH!
Origin: Russia
Online: No



Pirates of the Caribbean could have been a bona fide Xbox champion, a real terror of the high seas. Instead, it's a leaky dinghy, an incontinent parrot perched on players' shoulders.

Beautiful, buggy, and frustrating, the RPG *Pirates* stars Nathaniel Hawk and provides for exploration and battles on land and sea. Dungeons and caves hold hidden pirate booty. Quests aplenty afford opportunities for danger and adventure. A wealth of customizable options lets players build their own fleets and man them with scurvy salts, take control of powerful swords and pistols, and build the protagonist's skills in a number of directions. Its play, wonderfully open-ended, can easily consume an entire week or more.

An accursed license damns the title to Davy Jones' locker. It's clear the game was released before completion to coincide with the release of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* film, and it shows when Hawk has to deliver cargo and its intended recipient refuses to receive it, despite the mission being clearly listed on the game's Active Quest list. It's there when Hawk enters a person's house with its owner still inside, steals gold or other swag, and leaves unmolested. It's evident when Hawk enters a town, slaughters a number of guards to get into a house to retrieve information, kills more people while inside, and then, upon departure,



■ ProTip: Always use your spyglass to check for enemy ships, crappy games hidden off the port bow, and also Village People



■ The *H.M.S. Infected Pushtule* attempted to win first prize in the ship beauty contest by pasting huge cotton balls on its sides.

Pirates is a kick—**swift and painful**—to the gonads for all who've claimed the Xbox is no PC.

notes that the guards have all miraculously returned, totally oblivious to everything. Game-killing bugs eat players' save files, cause loan sharks to forget they're holding Hawk's money, or prevent our hero from fulfilling quests. Inexcusable.

Expect nonsensical situations to rule the Caribbean. At one point, Hawk escapes from a town under the protection of two French officers. As Hawk and his party make their way out of Dodge scot free, the general impression is: Hey! Everything is cool. Inexplicably, once the Frenchmen board their ship, Hawk is set upon by a swarm of guards and asked to fight or die trying. Instances such as these are more common than is acceptable and, aside from causing excessive head scratching, serves to take players out of *Pirates*' otherwise immersive world.

Pirates is a kick—swift and painful—to the gonads for all who've claimed the Xbox is no PC. No matter how sweet it is to weather one of the game's twisters with their gorgeous darkened skies and seas, or how insanely fun to cut a swath through a horde of skeletons (and skeleton monkeys), there's no denying it: This is a junky PC game waiting to be patched. It should be made to walk the plank.

Greg Orlando



It's fun to create your own salty sailor shanties while playing *Pirates*. Some examples: "Oh, Dear God, There's Not Enough Grog in the World to Make Me Forget That *Pirates of the Caribbean* Just Ate My Saved Games," and "Dirge of the Quest That Was Once There, but Now Has Mysteriously Disappeared." Yo-ho!

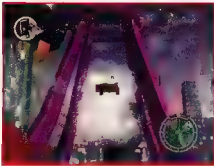


■ Sea battles can be concluded when one ship gets near enough to another to allow for boarding parties to duke it out. Killing the enemy means you get to take his ship.

Two out of Ten

THE SIMPSONS HIT & RUN

Dev: Radical Ent. Grand Theft: Homer
Pub: Vivendi / Universal Origin: Canada
Players: 1 Online: No



■ Fun Springfield venues include the tire fire, the escalator to nowhere, the monorail, the ToMacco fields, and town hall.

□ "I blame society!" Homer Simpson yells as he plows through Springfield's mean streets in Barney Gumble's Plow King truck. Trees explode when he smashes into them. Coins spurt. Springfieldians fly off his hood and ragdoll onto the cement. Let nothing stand in the way of a man's run to the Kwik-E-Mart.

Grand Theft Auto has come to Xbox earlier than expected, albeit with cartoon characters and 95 percent of its violence neatly purged. As the Simpsons and some of their wacky cohorts, players get to explore a 3D Springfield by car or on foot, performing missions, exploring, collecting goodies, and displaying wanton disregard for public property.

Fast and fun, *The Simpsons Hit & Run* can be played and thoroughly enjoyed in 10-minute portions. All of Springfield awaits exploration and/or destruction, from Casa de Simpson to the Isotopes' stadium, and the game holds a truckful of cool references and sight gags. Great chunks of steaming hot humor are imbedded into the game as well, such as when crusty old



nuclear power plant owner Montgomery Burns yells, "Mindless drones! Return to your ugly families!" at the end of another workday.

Missions here often involve lifting that bale and toting that barge, but there's so much good stuff to see, do, and smash into, it's hardly noticeable.

Smooth controls top this delightful meal and tons of replay value make *Hit & Run*, dare we say it? Ehnh-xcellent.
Greg Orlando

Eight out of Ten

PRO CAST SPORTS FISHING GAME

Dev: Capcom Pub: Capcom Players: 1 Fish: Fried Origin: Japan Online: No

□ "Welcome to a new kind of fishing game," the announcer for *Pro Cast Sports Fishing Game* says. He is lying and you should not believe him. There is nothing new about *Pro Cast Sports Fishing Game* save for perhaps its morbid obsession with not populating its video waters with very many fish. If this man was strapped to a lie detector and made this statement, the machine would launch itself straight into the sky and then explode.

It may be realistic to have a fishing game where the fish are all in hiding or killed off by man-made pollutants, but it's certainly not much fun. At times, *Pro Cast's* arenas are seemingly devoid of fish, which means fishermen are forced to stare endlessly at bland, gray-green underwater environments, hoping against hope that there's something, anything out there.

The standard fishing modes allow for arcade-style drear and simulation-style boredom. In Simulation mode, caught fish equal points, and points can be redeemed for hints (avoid this game, sadly, not being one of them) or various forms of equipment such as



■ Spinted practice, *Pro Cast* teaches us, is a surefire cure for tension.

lures, hats, boats, etc. It's also possible, in Simulation mode, to drive a boat close to another craft to initiate a chat with a fellow angler. It's here that *Pro Cast* really soars, with NPCs offering such bon mots as, "I don't feel like fishing. Actually, I was just taken here against my will. So I'm pretending to fish as [sic] wait for my boyfriend. Whew. It's boring. Is fishing really fun?"

No. No it isn't.
Not here. Not at all.

Greg Orlando

Four out of Ten

SYBERIA

Dev: Microdis Pub: XS Games Players: 1 Point: And Clicked Origin: France Online: No

□ The adventure genre is, arguably, dying. Perhaps never realizing its potential in a console market, the once mighty species—most remembered through the early works of Sierra and LucasArts—has been on a decline as gamers demand more action, violence, and gameplay interaction. But that hasn't stopped French developer Microdis from taking a stab at the genre with *Syberia*.

As American lawyer Kate Walker, players must find Hans Voralberg, the rightful heir to an automaton company, to close a lucrative buy-out deal. Believed to have been dead the past decade or so, new details arose of Hans' survival after the death of his sister, who was thought to have been the last remaining heir to the family business. Now it's your job to find him and seal the transaction.

A surface examination of *Syberia* reveals no chinks in the armor; the (almost) steampunk-influenced aesthetic is a sight to behold, and the aural presentation excels. Even the puzzle-solving elements and made-for-mouse control scheme are



■ If you are bad, you go to Siberia. Sleep with sheep and you go to Syberia

adequately constructed.

Where *Syberia* begins to show its cracks, though, has more to do with the port (the game originally appeared on PCs) rather than gameplay folly. In what appears to be a rush job, the game is riddled with inexcusable bugs such as persistent crashing and invisible walls that prohibit movement. Perhaps more thorough game testing could have averted the further decline of this once-prized genre.

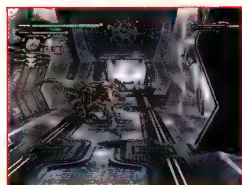
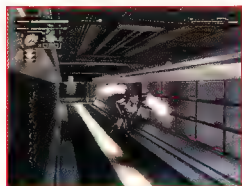
Kaiser Hwang

Four out of Ten

DINO CRISIS 3

In space, no one can hear an Xbox DVD snap in two

Dev: Capcom
Pub: Capcom
Players: 1
Feeling Dino: Sore
Origins: Japan
Online: No



■ Unlimited ammo and an integrated jetpack give *Dino 3* an action-shooter feel. Good times.

The "crisis" referenced in the title of Capcom's latest action adventure isn't so much about the threat of prehistoric beasts, as it is a commentary on the ill-conceived and clichéd miracle that is *Dino Crisis 3*. Ignoring, for the moment, that the game is essentially a retelling of Walt Disney's *The Black Hole* populated by Jurassic critters instead of faceless drones, *Crisis* feels surprisingly similar to Capcom's exclusive GameCube franchise, *Resident Evil*. Not that it's any surprise, of course; Capcom has been trying to spin off its *Evil* formula for years now, with mixed results. After playing through *Crisis*, however, it's downright baffling that Capcom could churn out stylish and original hits such as *Devil May Cry* (on PlayStation 2) one minute, only to betray players' trust with the equivalent of a digital lemon on Xbox.

Crisis opens with a beautifully rich sci-fi setup. A federation ship on routine patrol encounters the *Ozymandias*, a derelict spacecraft thought to have vanished without a trace 400 years ago. Taken down a completely different path, Capcom could have turned *Crisis* into a riveting ghost-ship thriller. Instead, the publisher insisted on pushing the *Dino* franchise, a hackneyed Michael Crichton-inspired survival-horror experiment, into the final frontier. The results, predictably enough, are ridiculous.



■ Players encounter the Zombisaurus, a terrifying new breed of dinosaurs. Zombisauruses are frightening because they're dinos without skin. Kill them with wild abandon to beat this game.

Like *Resident Evil*, *Dino Crisis 3* is a game based on the design principle of limitations.

Like *Evil*, *Crisis* is a game based on the design principle of limitations. In Capcom's zombie-infested survival-horror adventure, these restrictions manifested themselves in scarce supplies and first-aid kits, inhibitive inventory slots, scant save-game

opportunities, and stifling controls. *Crisis* removes the manufactured difficulty of a slipshod control scheme, while still adhering to survival horror's high-stakes ethos.

Tragically, the game's camera system is a joke. Players won't actually get to see what they're shooting more than half the time because the camera has a tendency to point in all the wrong directions at the right time. Even worse are *Crisis*' platformer elements that often require players to make precision jumps without the benefit of a clear view to the next platform.

Although the disrespectful camera pretty much ruins an otherwise decent action experience, *Crisis* does have its moments, thanks mostly to the game's incredible ambience. The various portions of the *Ozymandias* are rendered with such exacting detail and exotic flourish that it almost never gets old to stare into the heart of *Crisis*' uncompromisingly pure aesthetics. Even if the goal is, ultimately, to slaughter cyber-dinos in space.

Che Chou



■ It's good to know that hundreds of years into the future, there will still be crates for our heroes to bust open and reap goodies from. Also note that in the far future, crates get bigger.

Identity Crisis



As a series, *Dino Crisis* has seen a major revision in gameplay with every release. The original *Crisis* (PlayStation) was a stiff-but-intense *Resident Evil* clone. *Crisis 2* (again, PS1) revamped the game's pacing to focus more on action and less on key hunts. *Crisis 3*, in turn, is a fusion of its predecessors.

Five out of Ten

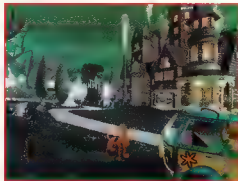
SCOOBY-DOO! NIGHT OF 100 FRIGHTS

Dev: Heavy Iron Studios Pub: THQ Players: 1 Fright: Light Origin: Culver City, CA Online: No

□ Much like the Saturday morning cartoon that's experiencing a resurgence in popularity, *Scooky-Doo! Night of 100 Frights* is not at all successful or frightening. But it is fairly entertaining. A straightforward platformer with Scooby dressing, *Frights* is competent, but not innovative.

As with every Scooby-Doo cartoon, Scooby and the gang are investigating a mystery in a haunted house—but of course, the story here is irrelevant. Players control Scooby through locales such as a hedge maze and a graveyard, maneuvering him to obtain keys and Scooby snacks that unlock new areas. Sandwiches, cake slices, and chicken legs give extra lives. Ghosts, zombies, and other enemies patrol tiny areas and don't seem particularly interested in pursuit, so they tend not to be as problematic as, say, the occasionally janky camera.

Reminiscent of *Ape Escape* for PlayStation 2, Scooby also gets various gadgets along the way, such as bunny slippers that help him sneak past baddies. Touches like this help break up the monotony of level upon



■ As it turns out, there are only 96 frights to be had here. We want our money back.

level of jumping puzzles. What brings *Frights* up a notch from its ho-hum gameplay, though, is the pure Scooby-ness of it all. The voice actors from the original cartoon lend an authenticity to the game, and the music is even better than you remember. The tongue-in-cheek humor is also intact, as is the show's laugh track. Although, admittedly, it's more than a bit disconcerting to hear laughter when Scooby plunges off a cliff to his doggy death.

Carrie Shepherd

Five out of Ten

MOJO!

Dev: Crave Ent. Pub: Crave Ent. Players: 1-4 Mojo: Jojo Origin: Los Angeles, CA Online: No

□ If this game represents the state of mojo in America, then things are dire indeed. It's reminiscent of the Moxie Scare of '82, or even the Jujitsu Shortage of '67. But many of the world's mojo indicators are healthy, showing a steady increase in recent years. Most likely, Crave's new puzzle game is not a harbinger of mojo decline; it's merely an uninspired knockoff of *Marble Madness*. There is no cause for panic.

There is cause for boredom. In *Mojo!*, players maneuver marbles around the game board, destroying blocks matching their marble's current color, which can be changed with "infusers." Looks, unbreakable blocks, and gravity wells act as obstacles. Everything works as it should, but the sum of these parts is booring with as many extra "O"s as you please.

Mojo! gives players no reason to care about their puzzle-solving performance. No extra blocks fall from the sky if the player's pace is slow. No coiled purple snake exists to spur progress. And unlike the superior game it copies, *Mojo!*'s timer counts up, not



■ This is a good puzzle game in the same way *Tao Feng* is a good fighter. It isn't.

down—so players can basically take as long as they want. True, one's "mojo" (or marble health) ebbs away constantly, but since it can only be replenished at the end of a level, this imparts no sense of urgency or drama. Either the marble makes it or it doesn't, and either way, few will care. Even in multiplayer, one player's skillful performance doesn't hinder his opponents; he just gets more points.

No mo' *Mojo!* Even at \$20. Thanks.

Paul V. Byrnes

Three out of Ten

BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER: CHAOS BLEEDS

Dev: Eurocom Pub: Vivendi/Universal Players: 1-4 Chaos: Betchen Origin: England Online: No

□ Buffy the vampire slayer may have staked her last bloodsuckers on the idiot box. Her videogame adventures, with luck, will continue onward until everyone involved has paid off his/her mortgage twice over. Her new adventure *Buffy The Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds* treads no new ground, but neither does it degrade into a sanguine mess.

Developer Eurocom does a fine job here, though it has made some peculiar gameplay choices with this third-person 3D adventure. This time, Buffy shares center spotlight with her friends and (sometimes) enemies Willow, Xander, Faith, Spike, and Sid the homicidal ventriloquist's dummy. Although it's interesting to take the role of these new characters, the whole is somewhat diluted by it. The appeal of playing with Buffy's spunky sidekick Willow, despite her ability to toss spells, is minimal. Xander, normally an inept sort, now features prominently as a skilled brawler.

A solid plot anchors the game, but the little things that seem sort of screenshot—the slew of playable



■ Children of the night, what beautiful music they make when stabbed through the heart

characters that add nothing to the proceedings, dull puzzles, and uninspired graphics—tend to take their toll. The 3D action is also hampered by a camera that needs frequent adjustment to ensure players have a good view of their character plus any approaching onscreen baddies. It's a nice stab, but one that does not surpass its predecessor *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* in any way, save for its inclusion of a fine complement of multiplayer modes.

Greg Orlando

Six out of Ten

FUTURAMA

Dev: UDS Pub: Vivendi/Universal Players: 1 Bender: Break Origin: Sweden Online: No

□ Welcome to the Future, *Futurama* proclaims mightily, Now Get Out! This cel-shaded platformer brings the well-loved animated show to life but, sadly, displays little in the way of either life or animation.

Players control the idiot manchild Fry, the one-eyed pilot Leela, the alcoholic automaton Bender, and the alien crustacean Dr. Zoidberg as they storm through a dystopian world in which scientists have yet to devise a cure for platforms and jumping puzzles. Each character here has a different style of play (Fry shoots guns, Bender punches and kicks, etc.), but it's all variations on one theme: uninspired gameplay.

Developer UDS gleefully crams every platforming cliché it can into *Futurama*. Can you collect stuff? Does the Pope wear a funny hat? Do you get to jump on a series of platforms to pull a lever to allow you to jump on more platforms? Is grass green? At any point in time does *Futurama* allow you to jump on the back of an animal that's, say, crossing a body of water? Do bears do their dirty, sinful business in the woods?



■ *Futurama* canceled. Xbox Nation sad. Fry taking out his frustration on mutants. All is not well.

Attempts at creativity here fall flat. When Fry jumps into a cockpit of a giant chicken robot, the perspective shifts from third- to first-person and it's an all-too-welcome escape from hopping on [insert random platform here]. Yet the controls are so poorly tuned, a simple tap of the analog stick sends the weapon crosshairs flying across the screen. With effort, the game could have soared. Instead, it's standard prime-time fluff.

Greg Orlando

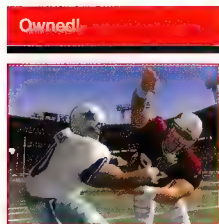
Five out of Ten

MADDEN 2004

The Super Bowl of football videogames



■ "Football combines two of the worst things in American life. It is violence punctuated by committee meetings."—George F. Will



Owner mode lets you run the financial side of a professional football franchise, but unless you're into spreadsheets and the micromanagement of ticket, concessions, and soda prices, it's not as fun as you'd think. However, one nice touch is the ability to piss off your old fans by moving your team to a new city and a custom-designed stadium.

Aurally and visually stunning, *Madden 2004* is easily the best digital re-creation of football ever made. Running backs pinball off multiple linebackers as they bounce through the hole. Stadiums feel vibrant, massive, and alive. In 20 years, this is the sports game everyone will remember. (Until next year, of course.)

Last year's emergence of Michael Vick and an emphasis on passing in the league proved the book on football is in the middle of revisions as a new style of play emerges. Improvisation at the line of scrimmage that the West Coast offense never accounted for. Three and four wide receiver sets on first down. Directed quarterback pass-run options. Blitzing on every down.

This wide-open style probably has Vince Lombardi turning in the Earth, but *Madden 2004* embraces and accounts for these philosophical shifts. Against A.I.-controlled quarterbacks such as Vick and Donovan McNabb, you must account for their scrambling in your defensive play-calling with blitzes and quarterback spies.

Intriguing new context-sensitive Playmaker Controls reflect this new approach. Accessed through the right analog controller, these subtle commands allow for greater flexibility in the middle of a play. On the run, you can direct your blockers to hit would-be tacklers; while passing, you can wave your primary receiver deep or call him



■ Fun Fact: Former pro football quarterback Joe "Genius" Theisman once said, "Nobody in football should be called a genius. A genius is a guy like Norman Einstein."

Aurally and visually stunning, *Madden 2004* is easily the best re-creation of digital football ever made.

back to the ball; on defense, you can cheat your safeties in against the run or back against the pass.

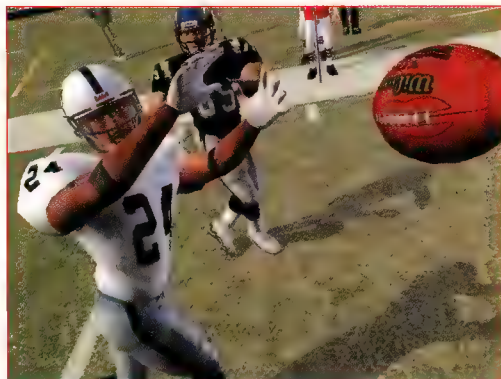
Given the deep level of sophistication already present in the *Madden* series, many players may not initially touch the Playmaker controls or fiddle

with the brand-new Owner mode. But that's okay, because *Madden 2004* allows for seemingly infinite flexibility and a variety of modes.

However, Franchise mode (which allows season after season of play) sports a novel RPG twist that will suck in both novice and expert *Maddentes* alike. At the start of a season, you can train your players and yourself via a set of minigames such as bull-rushing defensive exercises and coffin corner punting. While previous *Madden* games have also featured these, bolting them into season play makes player development in *Madden 2004* a more personal and rewarding experience.

Double-teamed receivers still catch deep passes far too easily on the default Pro difficulty setting, and the new ball fake on play action passes feels misleading and unfair, but these are small nits to pick. As overall digital sports experiences go, *Madden 2004* is unparalleled. Provided of course, that online play is not a priority. EA's distaste for Xbox Live strikes yet again.

George Jones



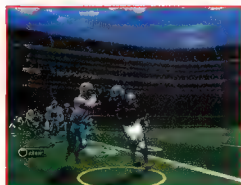
■ Shortly after this picture was taken, the AstroTurf rose up to kill the players that had, for so long, been trodding upon it. And then the beer drank itself.

Nine out of Ten

NFL FEVER 2004

A distant third on the gridiron

Dev: Microsoft
Pub: Microsoft
Players: 1-4
Fever: 103 F
Ongiri: Redmond, WA
Online: Yes



■ "No, thank you, dear sir!" Willy "White Shoes" Johnson refuses yet another pamphlet from a Jehovah's witness.



The biggest thing *NFL Fever* has going for it is Microsoft's new XSN network (see story on page 16). Essentially, XSN provides the equivalent of fully customizable fantasy sports leagues. One can easily set up a league on XSNsports.com, take on rivals over Xbox Live, and track up-to-date stats on any PC throughout the season. It's compelling stuff...if only the actual game itself was better.

Here's a surefire way to test how polished an Xbox football game really is. Select the Atlanta Falcons, and then try to scramble for big gains out of the pocket with quarterback Michael Vick. Then play against the Atlanta Falcons and watch whether or not a computer-controlled Vick breaks the pocket. If the game-breaking southpaw quarterback scrambles successfully six or seven times out of 10, the game in question is up to date with the ever-evolving nature of the NFL.

Both *Madden 2004* and *ESPN NFL Football* account for the game-changing style of play that Vick, Donovan McNabb, and company have brought to the game. *NFL Fever 2004* does not. By forcing these next-generation quarterbacks into the role of drop-back passer, Microsoft effectively misses the crucial, adaptive aspect of the NFL.

A cartoony visual style and color palette dilutes the hard-hitting realism of the game. A dearth of player animations often make it look like your players are skating around on the field. Overly simple, symmetrical pass plays that still map receivers to the dreaded black button on the Xbox controller, which remains one of the toughest buttons to reach in all of gaming.

Fever does sound better than *Madden* and *ESPN*, with powerfully loud crowd cheering and tons of smack-talking in the trenches between



■ It was fourth down and infinity to go when the Jets decided to employ a new tactic: the forward pass. Instead of standing still and getting hit, the quarterback threw the ball to a "receiver."

A cartoony visual style and color palette dilutes the hard-hitting realism of the game.

players—at times, you'll even hear linebackers taunting individual players by name. Those equipped with 5.1 sound systems are going to be particularly impressed.

Unfortunately, rest of the experience generally leaves one flat. Even *Fever's*

innovations—such as the ability to audible a receiver into a route, or your cornerbacks into bump-and-run coverage—feel slow and awkward. Changing your receiver's route from a simple five-yard out into a post, for example, requires pressing the yellow Y button, selecting the receiver, deciding whether you want the receiver to change his route or block, then choosing the post pattern itself and accepting the changes.

Worse still, all these moves are visible, so if you're playing a human opponent, he can see exactly what you're doing. By contrast, *Madden* is far more efficient: hit the Y button, choose the receiver, then move the controller in a direction to invisibly select a hot route.

Hardcore football fans might want to rent *Fever* and try it out simply for comparison's sake, but it's tough to recommend (especially at \$50) this one over the far more sophisticated *Madden* or *ESPN* under any circumstances.

George Jones



■ Xbox Nation longs for the return of old-school football games such as *Pigskin* and *Mutant League Football*. Where have you gone, Bones Jackson?

Six out of Ten

ESPN NFL FOOTBALL

Visual Concepts crafts a worthy—and online—challenger

Dev: Visual Concepts
Pub: Sega
Players: 1-4
10 Yards: 30 Feet
Origin: San Rafael, CA
Online: Yes



Given the current craze in home décor, maybe next year Sega and the Bravo Network can collaborate on a crib design television show: *Queer Eye for the ESPN NFL Football Guy*. Gamers can then learn how to match the floor tile with their end tables in *The Crib*, *ESPN NFL Football*'s unique player's perk that rewards on-field exploits with sofas, bobblehead dolls, and minigames such as paper football.

Because *ESPN Football* comes closer to *Madden 2004* in quality than any other football game this year, *The Crib*, much like the novel-but-flawed *First-Person Football* mode (see sidebar), will be viewed as quirky and loaded with potential rather than dismissed as unnecessary, attention-grabbing hokum.

If there was no *Madden*, *ESPN Football* would easily be the best football game this year. That's no weak praise: *Madden*'s lightning-fast, in-your-face flavor and franchise-moving, stadium-building Owner mode provide the best football experience of all time. But with a luxury box full of career features and a style of play that will appeal to fans frustrated by *Madden*'s quicker tempo, *Sega* makes a contest out of what could easily have been a blow-out.

Previous ESPN-branded sports titles have incorporated theme songs and announcers, but none of the attitude or enthusiasm the cable-TV network



■ Joey "The Squid" Parrella always wrote his name inside his helmet so he could find it in a hurry. His well-laid plans were foiled when his team signed Donny "Two Hands" Parrella.

If there was no *Madden*, *ESPN NFL Football* would easily be the best football game this year.

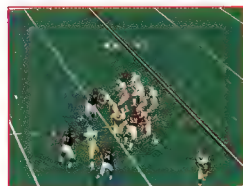
exudes. *ESPN Football* goes all-out in combining TV-caliber presentation with spectacular on-field play. Pretty transitions and slick-looking ESPN graphics get gamers' heads nodding. Microphones that pick up trash-talking players and close-up reaction shots of face-

painted fans will elicit a whole new realm of smiles and wows. Be warned though: When you throw an interception in the end zone and watch your fans cover their heads and groan in disgust, you'll honestly feel bad about yourself.

Thankfully, when you throw that crucial pick, you won't have anyone to blame but yourself. In *ESPN Football*, Visual Concepts—Sega's long-running design team on this series—maintains the same deliberate style of play as it did with the popular *NFL 2K* series. While a little slower and less immediate than *Madden*, the pace allows for cleaner, easier drop-backs and fewer panic-driven plays that go horribly wrong.

For some reason, this slower play makes the establishment of an early running game a near impossibility, but that's more a side effect of the NFL's front-heavy two-deep defenses than anything. As in *Madden*, *NFL Fever*, and real life, running the football is no cake-walk. In the end, *Sega* provides Xbox's best online football game; if that's your priority, this is the easy choice.

George Jones



■ Bud Watery defeated Bud Cold in Bud Bowl XXXVII. After the game, everybody got sober and performed charitable acts.

First-Person Football



Despite its potential, *ESPN's* First-Person Football is gimmicky and certainly not worth buying the game for. Hits and tackles shine in this mode, but passing and running just don't work, mostly because the lack of peripheral vision makes it nearly impossible to anticipate and react to the defense.



■ Brett Favre was worried he'd be pitted against the Atlanta Falcons' secret weapon: a fully armed and operational Death Star. Then he realized death stations were illegal in football.

Eight out of Ten

ESPN NHL HOCKEY

Dev: Visual Concepts
Pub: Sega
Players: 1-4

Ice: Ice, baby
Origin: San Rafael, CA
Online: Yes



■ Bottom: In case you couldn't tell by the three inconspicuous references, this game is brought to you by ESPN.

□ In *ESPN NHL Hockey*, Sega offers up an idealized interpretation of the sport emphasizing motion, passing, and wide-open play that stands in stark contrast to the visceral, violent action of EA Sports' *NHL 2004*.

Much like EA Sports' effort, *ESPN Hockey* is a visually striking experience, with graphics and player animations as close to lifelike as we've ever seen. And, similar to Sega's *ESPN NFL Football* game, the production values are excellent. In fact, the slick television-style presentation and unbelievably realistic back and forth in the broadcasters' booth might fool nongamers into thinking they're watching a real game.

ESPN Hockey's offensive game is sublime. Players intuitively get the puck to the right man as they set up an attack, and Sega's use of the right analog stick allows for a wide range of sweet-looking deke motions. Unfortunately, playing defense can become frustrating, as players are often slow getting back to the goal.

Although *ESPN Hockey* features a Career mode spanning multiple seasons, it lacks the experience point-

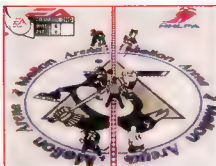


based franchise play found in EA Sports' *NHL 2004*. Still, choosing between the two games is a close call. It's a shame to have to recommend one title over the other, particularly because gamers can't really go wrong with either option. As is the case with this year's EA versus Sega gridiron battle, those

craving online competition have an easy choice, and that's Sega's Xbox Live-enabled *NHL 2004*
George Jones

Eight out of Ten

NHL 2004



■ Here is the most boring screen shot of all time. It deserves a caption as exciting as a tax audit.

□ The NHL hockey Sega Genesis fans knew and loved in the early 1990s has finally re-emerged with the release of *NHL 2004*. And the game manages to simultaneously capture the fluidity, brutality, and tension of modern professional hockey.

NHL 2004 accentuates its action in typical EA Sports fashion with stunningly realistic graphics and character animations, rapid-fire play that leaves your controller hand numb, and a searing rock-heavy soundtrack that establishes a driving pace.

New features such as the saucer pass, which allows you to lift passes into the air above defenders' sticks near the goal, are supplemented by the use of the right analog controller—a laudable EA Sports trend across all its sports titles—that permits you to deke with the puck on offense and defense, and customize checks.

In a twist both core and casual gamers will appreciate, *NHL 2004* boasts a brand-new Franchise mode, allowing players to accumulate experience points over the course of a season based on their performance.



They can then spend these points on improved facilities, training staffs, and coaching, each of which will affect a team's abilities.

NHL 2004 has some stiff competition in Sega's *ESPN NHL Hockey*, which features a noticeably smoother style of play and the all-important

Dev: EA Sports
Pub: EA Canada
Players: 1-4

Puck: Off
Origin: Redwood City, CA
Online: No

online option. But pound for pound, its gritty play—and experience points—propel *NHL 2004* to a hard-fought win.
George Jones

Eight out of Ten

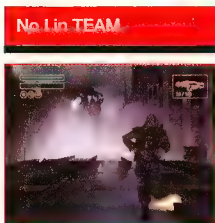
FREEDOM FIGHTERS

Fighting communism one bullet at a time

Dev: IO Interactive
Pub: EA
Players: 1-2
Libertine: City
Origin: Denmark
Online: No



■ *Freedom Fighters* includes a two-player Versus mode. Though briefly entertaining, a Co-op mode would have been far more welcome.



Part of the problem with *Freedom Fighters*' squad-based play is that the "squad" feels entirely disposable. Turnover rates are high, and watching your mate take 30 shots to the chest, fall to the ground, and then pop back up with a bubbly "Thanks!" when you run over him and press the A button does not persuasive immersion make.

The most interesting thing about IO Interactive's latest digital melodrama is also its most paper-thin: an eminently forgettable yet bizarrely ironic storyline. Set in an alternate reality wherein the Soviet Union has won the Cold War, and invaded the United States for a communist takeover, the game takes place on the front lines: a battle-scarred New York City overrun with tanks, turrets, and a cornucopia of hammer-and-sickle-flavored propaganda. Cut-scenes and news broadcasts tell the story of an invading Pinko government "concerned for years by the plight of poor American people suffering under a corrupt regime," and genuinely interested in "restoring peace and stability to your troubled country." It's tough to tell whether or not *Freedom Fighters* was intentionally wrought with such a poignant parallel to the real world's current state of international affairs, regardless, the results are nothing short of eerily prophetic.

Beyond these thematic generalities, however, it quickly becomes clear that in *Freedom*'s world, plot and character take a distant backseat to making guns go ka-klack and untended explodables go ka-boom. After the surprisingly heady *Hitman 2*, IO has changed course with *Freedom*; make no mistake about it, this is a spring-loaded, iron-hearted shoot-em-up, through and through.

Freedom does many things right.



■ While the environments are quite beautiful, the simplicity of *Freedom Fighters*' enemies and situational puzzles is generally disappointing. The perfect Tuesday-night rental, then.

On a purely aesthetic level, *Freedom* immerses the player in its dense urban setting exceedingly well.

The atmosphere and environments are superbly crafted, and dashing frantically through a gritty New York cityscape is an experience not to be missed. From the convincing architecture to the cloudy, orange-streaked skyline, the game's various visual elements succeed

in re-creating a digital Manhattan more elegantly than even *Grand Theft Auto III*. One a purely aesthetic level, *Freedom* immerses the player in its dense urban setting exceedingly well.

The problems come in creating compelling enemies, plot scenarios, and reasons to forge ahead. What initially appears to be a dynamic, A.I.-driven strategic adventure at times devolves into little more than *Rush'n Attack* on a heavy dose of Creatine. While level design is solid, NPCs have the personalities of spatulas, and environments are often jarringly noninteractive. The tone of the whole affair is intentionally campy, but some oddly old-school design decisions and a general prevalence of overly scripted gameplay make suspension of disbelief a difficult task. While combat is solid (if not entirely polished), inconsistent enemy A.I. and a lack of control nuance make some missions feel more like work than they should. Worth the ride, certainly, but this one could have done with a little less fighting and a little more freedom.

Evann Shamoon



■ *Freedom Fighters*' main character, Christopher Stone, is a plumber brought into La Resistance by his love for all things United, as well as his love for seeing large objects blow up real good-like.

Seven out of Ten

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8 out of 10 GMR readers have a game in mind before they go shopping. Guess where they get their ideas from?

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YOUR WINNING PLAY AT RETAIL

EB
GAMES
Magazine Insider

- Best of the Best
- Game of the Year
- Best of the Best





ZIFF DAVIS MEDIA GAME GROUP:

DELIVERING EVERY PIECE OF
THE CORE GAMING PUZZLE
YOU NEED.

GROOVERIDER: SLOT CAR THUNDER

Dev: King of the Jungle Pub: Encore Players: 1-4 Thunder: Stricken Origin: England Online: No

□ Budget games, by their very definition, are in a league of their own. Since the titles are cheaper, much of what is traditionally prized in games (production values and overall challenge, for example) gets cashed in at the thought that, for half the price, gamers can own a functional disc in a plastic green DVD case. Luckily, such is not entirely the case with Encore's latest cheapo offering, *Grooverider: Slot Car Thunder*.

Essentially a handful of fantasy slot-car courses strewn about in a variety of familiar domestic environments (read: bedrooms, living rooms, kitchens), *Grooverider* puts the player up against nasty A.I. opponents in a twitchy contest of eye-hand coordination and reaction times. What enables the game's brisk pace is *Grooverider*'s supremely simple control scheme, which rewires the shoulder triggers to change lanes, the analog stick to accelerate, and the A button to fire weapons.

It's simplistic, yes, but *Grooverider* is far from easy. On top of keeping one eye on competitors, players also need to moderate their entry speed into cor-



■ Now you can drive on the plastic highway to hell with teeny, tiny slot cars.

ners, as well as shift left and right to avoid various obstacles throughout the track. And since it's \$20, the action is just satisfying enough to warrant such a purchase—provided the customer is desperate enough for a quick-and-dirty fix. Just be forewarned: The game is as bland as it looks above. Everything about it screams budget, sure, but there are much worse full-priced games on the Xbox. With *Grooverider*, players get what they pay for.

Che Chu

Six out of Ten

ALTER ECHO

Dev: Outrage Pub: THQ Players: 1 Deep: Purple Origin: Orange County, CA Online: No

□ The name *Alter Echo* might make one think of an enticingly absurd hybrid of two classic Sega franchises, but the reality is much less kind. *Echo*, in actuality, is what happens when a game developer puts *Devil May Cry* and *Dance Dance Revolution* into a magical blending machine, along with a lava lamp and the entire VHS run of *Transformers: Beast Wars*. This ridiculous amalgamation makes more sense after playing the game for a while.

Echo is a well-intentioned action game. Case in point: Early on, the hero gains the ability to stop time and kill his enemies while they're in stasis. When this happens, the game basically becomes an abstract version of *Revolution*. If the player's timing is good, everything dies; if it's bad, he must accumulate the energy to try again. The hero can also change forms on the fly—into a gun-toting giant, or a spectral dog—and this adds some interesting elements to the combat, as shape-shifts are possible midcombo.

But then there's the aesthetic issue. All of *Echo* is rendered in purples, pinks, and yellows of the most mind-



■ Fun (but true) fact: A hungover reviewer Miguel Lopez vomited while playing *Alter Echo*.

bending hues, and they all pulsate and blend into each other exhibiting truly disturbing viscous properties. *Echo* should not be played by those prone to vertigo or motion sickness.

Echo's most tangible flaws are of a technical nature. The camera never quite gets it together during combat, and the animations are stilted and choppy. Add to this a combat system that feels half-finished, and the result is something that one only half wants to play.

Miguel Lopez

Five out of Ten

OUTLAW VOLLEYBALL

Dev: Simon & Schuster Pub: Hypnotix Players: 1-2 Volley: Brawl Origin: New Jersey Online: Yes

□ Court is now in session, with tastelessness presiding. The opening FMV for the over-the-top *Outlaw Volleyball* features a rocker-type biting the head off a live bat and from there, well, it loads its plate with butt-cheeks and questionable stereotypes.

Weak presentation takes its toll here, and the little things pockmark the big picture. Load times are overlong, and there's no option to change *Volleyball*'s control scheme, which is unfortunate because the hit-serve-spike-bump buttons as well as the trigger activating turbo boosts are all stacked on the right side of the Xbox controller. In-game commentary would need to improve fivefold to ascend to annoying. "Unlike me in high school," the chirpy announcer bleats at regular intervals, "Someone just scored!" Turn down the announcer, turn up the soundtrack, but be warned, the music pauses for the commentary.

Online play is the way to go, as it provides fun in meaty chunks not found in solo play; Computer-controlled opponents in the single-player modes have a tendency to



■ Young exotic dancer Summer proves this is indeed the breast of times.

perform as deviant Supermen, making dives and saves on the court's corners and then returning the ball with seemingly no effort. A computer-run ally on a player's team will exhibit the virtual intelligence of a grape, planting his body on a bomb that will blow him up or spiking the ball to a standing foe instead of, say, one who's still recovering from an explosion. Despite its obvious beautifully ugly characters and detailed courts, this *Volleyball* barely clears the net.

Greg Orlando

Five out of Ten

NHL HITZ PRO

Dev: Next Level Games Pub: Midway Players: 1-4 Hitz: Hard Origin: Vancouver, B.C. Online: No

□ *NHL Hitz*, videogame hockey's loud, boorish cousin, has just grown up. Midway's given the game a facelift and polish to great effect, replacing the overbearing amounts of flash and glitter with solid gameplay.

Don't misconstrue: Players in *NHL Hitz Pro* still catch fire and execute board-wrecking, bone-rendering body-checks. There are still Turbo boosts allowing an overworked defenseman to streak across the ice like Maurice "Rocket" Richard in his heyday. What's been changed is the game's tone. The addition of five-on-five play makes *Hitz* feel like real hockey, and not a pickup game as done by Warner Bros. and the Looney Tunes. Toned-down commentary by Tim Kitzrow and Harry Tienowitz (who mangled the basebrawl stinker *Sluggfest*), now gels with, instead of attempting to steamroll over, the in-game happenings.

This year, it's about hockey. Players will drive across the ice and swing their sticks wildly in an attempt to sweep in a rebound. Wings can receive back dumps and quickly jam the puck out to a center for a one-timer, or fake a slap



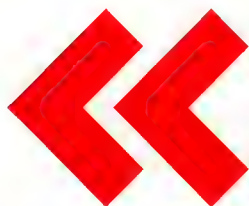
■ Where's the online play, Midway? We want *Hitz* on Xbox Live. And also lots of backruns

shot and then glide past a defenseman who's committed to blocking. Offense-men will bang at a puck to get a deflection. Puck-handling options offer players the opportunities to protect the puck against stick checks, and so on.

Sadly, the Xbox version for *Hitz* features no online play. This seems less of an omission and more of a slap in the face; the PlayStation 2 version lets players dial up and play. Lord Stanley himself would glower appropriately.

Greg Orlando

Eight out of Ten



REWIND

Go forward to the past with *Xbox Nation's* previous reviews

The top eight games from *Xbox Nation* 009, because 10 didn't really fit



Midnight Club II
Dev: Rockstar San Diego
Pub: Rockstar Games
Addictive gameplay, smooth frames, and challenging A.I. that does more than beeline from checkpoint to checkpoint.
XBN Rating: 8



NCAA Football 2004
Dev: EA Sports
Pub: Electronic Arts
The secret to unlocking *NCAA Football 2004* lies in its Create-a-School feature combined with its Dynasty mode.
XBN Rating: 8



Ghost Recon: Island Thunder
Dev: Red Storm
Pub: Ubi Soft
Eight new levels give players an unprecedented number of tactical opportunities, but online is where it's at.
XBN Rating: 7



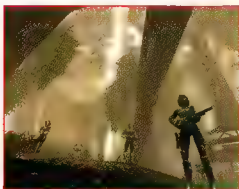
IndyCar Series
Dev: Brain in a Jar
Pub: Codemasters
If you value great gameplay and major challenge over eye candy, *IndyCar Series* may be the racer for you.
XBN Rating: 7



Midtown Madness 3
Dev: Dice
Pub: Microsoft
It's like a shiny new version of *Crazy Taxi*, but with Xbox Live—the more players, the merrier the chaos.
XBN Rating: 7



Wakeboarding Unleashed
Dev: Shaba Studios
Pub: Activision
The winning formula for *Wakeboarding Unleashed*? Brilliant water physics and the dynamics of rope play.
XBN Rating: 7



Brute Force
Dev: Digital Anvil
Pub: Microsoft
Heavy on technology and light on design, *Brute Force's* excellent controls and enemy A.I. make it worth a rental.
XBN Rating: 6



Hulk
Dev: Radical
Pub: Vivendi Universal
Graphically vibrant, with lots to smash and enemies to pummel. But don't even get us started on the product placement.
XBN Rating: 6

And the rest. . .

Game	Developer	Publisher	Rating
Aliens vs. Predator: Extinction	Zono	Electronic Arts	6
All-Star Baseball	Acclaim	Acclaim	3
Amped: Snowboarding	Microsoft	Microsoft	6
Apex	Milestone	Atari	8
Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance	Snowblind	Interplay	7
Batman: Dark Tomorrow	Kemco	Kemco	2
Batman: Vengeance	Ubi Soft Montreal	Ubi Soft	5
Battle Engine Aquila	Lost Toys	Infogrames	7
Big Mutha Truckerz	Eutechnyx	Empire Interactive	3
Black Stone: Magic and Steel	Xpec Inc.	Xicat	3
Blade II	Mucky Foot	Activision	4
Blink: The Time Sweeper	Artoon	Microsoft	6
Blood Omen II	Crystal Dynamics	Eidos	7
BloodRayne	Terminal Reality	Majesco	6
Bloody Roar Extreme	Fighting	Konami	5

Game	Developer	Publisher	Rating
BMX XXX	Z-Axis	Acclaim	4
Bruce Lee: Quest of the Dragon	Ronin	Universal Interactive	2
Buffy the Vampire Slayer	The Collective	Electronic Arts	8
Burnout 2: Point of Impact	Criterion Games	Acclaim	9
Capcom vs. SNK: EO	Capcom	Capcom	8
Chase: Hollywood Stunt Driver	I-Imagine	Bam!	6
Circus Maximus: Chariot Wars	Kodiak	Encore	5
Colin McRae Rally 3	Codemasters	Codemasters	8
Commandos 2: Men of Courage	Pyro	Eidos	7
Conflict: Desert Storm	SCI Games/Pivotal	Gotham Games	5
Crazy Taxi 3: High Roller	Sega	Acclaim	6
Dark Angel	Radical Ent.	Sierra/Fox Interactive	2
Dave Mirra 2	Z-Axis	Acclaim	5
Dead or Alive 3	Team Ninja	Tecmo	7
Dead to Rights	Namco	Namco	4

Game	Developer	Publisher	Rating
DOA: Xtreme Beach Volleyball	Team Ninja	Tecmo	7
Dynasty Warriors 3	Koei	Koei	8
Eggmania: Eggstreme Madness	Hot Gen Studios Ltd.	Kemco	5
Elder Scrolls 3: Morrowind	Bethesda Softworks	Bethesda Softworks	8
Enclave	Shinbreeze Studios	Conspiracy Games	5
Enter the Matrix	Shiny	Atari	3
ESPN Winter X Games Snowboarding 2002	Konami	Konami	4
Evil Dead: Fiistful of Boomstick	Vis Interactive	THQ	3
Fatal Frame	Tecmo	Tecmo	6
FIFA Soccer 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	8
Finding Nemo	Traveler's Tales	THQ	6
Fireblade	Kuju Entertainment	Midway	6
Freaky Flyers	Midway	Midway	4
Freestyle Metal X	Deibus Studios	Midway	4
Frogger Beyond	Konami	Konami	4
Furious Karting	Babylon	Atari	5
Fuzion Frenzy	Blitz Games	Microsoft	6
Genma Onimusha	Capcom	Capcom	7
Godzilla: Destroy All Monsters Melee	Pipeworks	Atari	4
GunValkyrie	Smilebit	Sega	6
Halo	Bungie	Microsoft	10
Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets	Eurocom/EA UK	EA Games	7
High Heat MLB 2004	3DO	3DO	8
Hilman 2: Silent Assassin	Io Interactive	Eidos	8
House of the Dead III	Wow	Sega	7
Hunter: The Reckoning	Digital Mayhem	Interplay	8
Indiana Jones and the Emperor's Tomb	The Collective	LucasArts	7
Inside Pitch 2003	MS Game Studios	Microsoft	3
Jedi Knight 2	Raven	LucasArts	7
Jedi Starfighter	Secret Level	LucasArts	7
Jet Set Radio Future	Smilebit	Sega	8
Jurassic Park: Operation Genesis	Universal	Vivendi	6
Kakuto Chojin	Red Faction	Microsoft	3
Kelly Slater's Pro Surfer	Treyarch	Activision	5
Kung Fu Chaos	Just Add Monsters	Microsoft	5
Legends of Wrestling II	Acclaim	Acclaim	4
Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring	WXP	Universal	2
Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers	EA/Stormfront	EA	5
Mace Griffin: Bounty Hunter	Warthog	Vivendi/Universal	5
Madden NFL 2003	Tiburon	EA Sports	9
Marvel vs. Capcom 2	Capcom	Capcom	3
Matt Hoffman's Pro BMX 2	Rainbow Studios	Activision	7
Max Payne	Remedy Ent. Neo	Rockstar	8
MechAssault	Day 1 Studios	Microsoft	7
Medal of Honor: Frontline	Dreamworks Int.	EA Games	7
Metal Dungeon	Panther	Xicat Interactive	4
Mike Tyson Heavyweight Boxing	Atomic Planet	Codemasters	4
Minority Report	Treyarch	Activision	5
MLB Slugfest 20-03	Midway	Midway	5
MLB Slugfest 20-04	Point of View	Midway	4
Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance	Midway	Midway	6
Moto GP2	Climax	THQ	8
Motor Trend Lotus Challenge	Kuju	Xicat	3
Murakumo	From Software	Ubi Soft	5
MVP Baseball 2003	EA Canada	EA Sports	7
MX Superfly	Pacific Coast	THQ	4
Myst III: Exile	Presto Studios	Ubi Soft	4
NASCAR Heat	MGI	Infogrames	5
NBA 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega Sports	8
NBA Inside Drive 2003	High Voltage	Microsoft	6
NBA Live 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	7
NBA Starting Five	Konami	Konami	5
NBA Street Vol. 2	EA Vancouver	Electronic Arts	9
NCAA 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega	7
NCAA College Basketball 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega Sports	7
NCAA Football 2003	EA Sports	Electronic Arts	8
Need for Speed: Hot Pursuit 2	EA Studios	Electronic Arts	7
NFL 2K3	Visual Concepts	Sega	9
NFL Blitz 20-03	Midway	Midway	6
NFL Fever 2003	MS Game Studios	Microsoft	8

Game	Developer	Publisher	Rating
NHL 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	7
NHL Hitz 20-03	Midway	Midway	7
Nickelodeon Party Blast	Data Design	Infogrames	2
Nightcaster II: Equinox	Jaleco	Jaleco	5
Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee	Oddworld Inhabitants	Microsoft	8
Outlaw Golf	Hypnotix	Simon & Schuster	7
Pac-Man World 2	Namco	Namco	5
Panzer Dragoon Orta	Smilebit	Sega	9
Phantasy Star Online	Sonic Team	Sega	7
Phantom Crash	Genki	Phantagram Interactive	8
Prisoner of War	Wide Games	Codemasters	7
Pro Race Driver	Codemasters	Codemasters	7
Project Gotham Racing	Bizarre Creations	Microsoft	8
Pulse Racer	Jaleco	Jaleco	2
Quantum Redshift	Curly Monsters	Microsoft	6
Ralliesport Challenge	Digital Illusions	Microsoft	8
Rally Fusion	Climax	Activision	6
Rayman 3: Hoodlum Havoc	Ubi Soft	Ubi Soft	6
Red Faction II	Voltion	THQ	4
Redcard Soccer 20-03	Midway	Midway	5
Reign of Fire	Kuju	Bam!	4
Rent-a-Hero No. 1	Sega	AIA USA	4
Return to Castle Wolfenstein	id/nerve Software	Activision	8
RoboCop	Titus	Titus	3
Robotech: Battlecry	Vicious Cycle	TDK	6
Rocky	Rage	Ubi Soft	7
Rollercoaster Tycoon	Chris Sawyer	Infogrames	6
Run Like Hell	Digital Mayhem	Interplay	7
Seabattle	Vision Scape	Simon & Schuster	2
Sega GT 2002	WOW Entertainment	Sega	8
Sega Soccer Slam	Black Box	Sega Players	2
Serious Sam	Gotham Games	Croteam	5
Shenmue II	Sega/AM2	Microsoft	7
Silent Hill 2	Konami	Konami	8
Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix	Gratuitous Games	Activision	4
Speed Kings 2	Climax	Acclaim	5
SSX Tricky	EA Canada	Electronic Arts	8
Stake	Garmoness Art	Metro3D	2
Star Wars Obi-Wan	LucasArts	LucasArts	5
Star Wars: Jedi Starfighter	Secret Level	LucasArts	5
Star Wars: The Clone Wars	LucasArts	Pandemic	6
State of Emergency	Vis	Rockstar Games	6
Steel Battalion	Capcom	Capcom	10
Street Hoops	Black Ops	Activision	3
Super Bubble Pop	Rune Craft	Jaleco	3
Superman: The Man of Steel	Circus Freak	Atari/Infogrames	4
Tao Feng: Fist of the Lotus	Studio Gigante	Microsoft	3
Taz: Wanted	Blitz Games	Infogrames	7
Terminator: Dawn of Fate	Paradigm Ent	Infogrames	2
The Italian Job	Climax	Eidos	4
The Sims	Maxis/Edge	EA Games	8
The Thing	Computer Artworks	Black Label	7
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2003	EA Sports	EA Sports	8
TimeSplitters 2	Free Radical	Eidos	8
TowJam & Earl III: Mission to Earth	Visual Concepts	Sega	7
Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon	Red Storm	Ubi Soft	8
Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell	Ubi Soft Montreal	Ubi Soft	8
Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4	Naversoft	Activision	7
Total Immers on Racing	Razorworks	Empire Interactive	6
UFC Tapout 2	Dream Factory	TDK Mediactive	5
Unreal Championship	Digital Extremes	Atari	7
Vexx	Acclaim	Acclaim	5
World Racing	Synetic	TDK Mediactive	4
World Series Baseball	Blue Shift/VC	Sega	9
World Series Baseball 2K3	Blue Shift	Sega	9
Wreckless	Bunkasha	Activision	8
WTA World Tour Tennis	Konami	Konami	4
WWF Raw	Anchor	THQ	5
X2: Wolverine's Revenge	Genepool	Activision	5
X-Men: Next Dimension	Paradox	Activision	3



INTERVIEW

RETURN FROM DARKNESS

Xbox Nation emerges from the shadows with Tenchu caretakers Tad Horie and Masanori Kuwasashi on the ancient discipline of videogame design



Every gamer can trace the roots of his ninja obsession back to a single thing or event. For the editors of *Xbox Nation*, the day ninjas assassinated *The Super Friends* in our collective heart was the day we got our hands on a G.I. Joe Storm Shadow ninja action figure. Not only did this plastic-shrouded servant of COBRA possess a chaotically cool attitude, he also came with a ton of gear—nunchakus, bows, swords—that stuck nicely to his backpack. For younger gamers, that point of origin could very well have been 1998, when Japanese developer K2 Ltd. unleashed *Tenchu* on the PlayStation and singlehandedly reclaimed the ninja's mystique from *Shinobi*'s then-cartoony image. In anticipation of the spring 2004 release of *Tenchu: Return From Darkness* on Xbox, *XBN* sits down with Tad Horie, producer at Activision in Japan, and Masanori Kuwasashi, game designer at K2, to discuss the past and future of 3D stealth action.

***Xbox Nation:* What was the original inspiration for *Tenchu*?**

Tad Horie: *Tenchu* was born with the idea of creating an authentic ninja simulator. There were many games at the time that used a ninja as the main character,

To me, videogames are already an art. To make something out of thin air—an idea—is an art. It is the art of changing a zero into a one.

but in a superhuman way. In reality, ninjas weren't superhuman—they were shadows that avoided confrontations at all costs.

***XBN:* Right. In fact, *Tenchu* on PlayStation revolutionized 3D action gaming by encouraging players to be stealthy and use caution during missions. How do you think the stealth-action genre has evolved since *Tenchu*'s release? What will be the next big breakthrough in terms of the stealth-action gameplay mechanic?**

Horie: The stealth-action genre has truly become huge. We're happy to have played a part in creating its popularity. The genre has evolved with different sets of rules for using stealth but it is a double-edged sword. Depending on the rules you create, the game could become fun or frustrating. In *Tenchu*, we've always created some breathing room—even if you're spotted. A.I. characters stop chasing you after a certain amount of time. Some of the newer stealth games immediately give you a "game over" for being spotted and will let you retry immediately. The immediate retry reflects the frustration of the game over, but it also makes a trial-and-error process for the player. We consider this puzzle-like element fun, while some consider it [lacking in] freedom. The trend is to

make deep story lines to cover up the frustration by making it worth going through the steps that the game designers force the player to walk through. Changing these stealth rules will be the next breakthrough. Good manga artists think about what would make their readers want to turn the page. Similarly, game design is about what will make the player want to press buttons. Stealthy gameplay is simply an interesting twist on this thinking.

***XBN:* Did the release of *Metal Gear Solid* effectively steal *Tenchu*'s thunder in terms of innovating a new 3D action subgenre? How have other, more recent stealth games (*Splinter Cell*, for instance) influenced the *Tenchu* series?**

Horie: The release of *MGS* truly broke the stealth-action genre wide open to a mass audience. In that sense, no thunder was stolen. It is always interesting to see other stealth games because of the rules they put into their games. That said, the *Tenchu* series has never really been influenced by other [stealth games].

***XBN:* How will *Tenchu: Return From Darkness* on Xbox differ from its PlayStation 2 versions? Masanori Kuwasashi:** There are a number of new

elements to the Xbox version of *Tenchu*, such as new missions and a new boss. However, we made the decision to stick with the three playable characters from *Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven*. On Xbox Live, the Co-op mode will allow gamers to play across all six multiplayer maps, similar to the PS2 version. We've listened to gamer feedback and have taken it into account while designing the Xbox version. For example, we are currently working with a new retry function to help ease any frustration through challenging portions of the game. And of course, graphically, the title will take advantage of the inherent technical capabilities of the Xbox, so improvements will be readily apparent in the game's graphics.

***XBN:* Many gamers complained about the enemy A.I. in *Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven*. What will you do to address this problem?**

Horie: The A.I. was quite tricky in *Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven* because we wanted to make sure players could finish the game. We'll be looking into implementing some new game rules to make the A.I. more fun for hardcore players.

***XBN:* In terms of game design, do American Hollywood-style action movies or comic**

books influence Japanese game design and development?

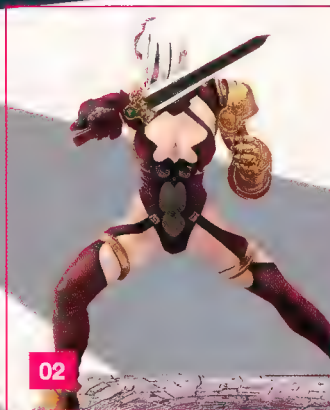
Horie: Many people think that the content in major Hollywood movies is always considered "cool" for the mass market, and that kind of thinking would, of course, affect your game design if you want a mass-market game. It's difficult to break away from this style of thinking because major movies also become common language when discussing ideas. For example, it's easier for a game designer to say, "Please, draw me a starship like in the movie [insert starship movie title here]" than to explain what a starship looks like. Once you start using that kind of language, the discipline needed for creating completely original content gets lost and you end up with scenes that you've seen somewhere in a movie. Some creators actually use this the other way, by making games with cut scenes that parody movies.

***XBN:* What is preventing videogames from truly coming into their own as an art form? Do you see the medium someday mirroring the film industry, splintering off into big-budget, mainstream games and low-budget, independent titles?**

Horie: This depends on your point of view. To me, videogames are already an art. To make something out of thin air—an idea—is an art. It is the art of changing a zero into a one. If you can take nothing and change it into something, then you are an artist and you have performed an art. Now, from a different perspective, videogames don't need to be an art form. The *raison d'être* for videogames is to entertain. If it entertains you and you have fun with it, then who cares if it is called art or not? I guess more people will see videogames as a form of art once they realize the entertainment value of what they play. If you dissect a game like *Tenchu*, it is a mélange of graphical artwork, music, creative thinking, and even performances such as voice acting. They are all put together by technology, with a focused energy directed to entertain. Once this reality kicks in, then people will see games as a form of art. We just need to get more games in front of more people.

Do I see the medium mirroring the film industry? Perhaps. Gamers are smart and they can tell if the game had a big budget or not. Some genres are more popular than others, and even the small theater-type games have a fair chance of getting good reviews and selling well. One difference I've noticed, though, is that Japanese games seem to be easier to digest in the States in comparison to Japanese films.

After having worked on *Wreckless* and *Tenchu: Wrath of Heaven*, I'd have to say, I have a lot of respect for artists who create games. The process of giving birth to a new game is a roller-coaster ride—it's just crazy. The amount of heart, effort, and devotion being put into creating even one minute of gameplay is beyond what most people imagine. ■



WANT vs. NEED

Let the redistribution of goods begin with the purchasing of these fantastically fine five items



01 The Soul of Chogokin GX-13—Dancouger

Manufacturer: Bandai
www.toyboxdx.com
Price: \$175

What you're gawking at on the other side of this page is Dancouger, a hefty four-in-one transformable toy weighing in at just over 4 pounds. Danny boy is the latest entry in Bandai's Soul of Chogokin series, a line of toys that takes giant robot figures from famous Japanese cartoons of the '70s and '80s and reproduces anime-accurate versions with the latest manufacturing technology.

The Japanese word *chogokin* literally translates to "super alloy," and that's exactly what these toys offer. The best of the vintage chogokin pieces, once mass produced during the mid-'70s and early-'80s, were stylized reproductions of their TV-show counterparts, and even more importantly, these suckers are made of solid cool-to-the-touch steel. Their tough construction and novel gimmicks (spring-loaded rocket fists, anyone?) have made chogokins a timeless classic for

kids of a previous generation, and the crusty old collectors they've grown up to become.

Codename GX-13 in the series, Dancouger towers at nearly 15 inches tall and separates into four separate machines, all of which transform into three other variations independently: vehicle, animal, and robot. If you do the math, that's basically 13 different ways to play with ol' Danny boy, including its awesome, fully-assembled bad-ass self.

The toy is, of course, not perfect. At 175 bucks, it's f*cking jiggy. The price tag is somewhat justified by all the die cast metal parts here, but Dancouger is still rather flimsy on its feet, no thanks mostly to the mechanical complexity of its combined form. Still, Dancouger is one of the most elaborate and technically amazing toys we've ever seen. For fans of giant mechs, Danny is the boss of them all.

02 Soul Calibur II Figures

Manufacturer: Todd McFarlane Toys
www.spawn.com
Price: \$10

When he's not shelling out millions for historic baseballs, producing cutting-edge animation, designing original characters for Japanese fighting games, and generally making more money than the rest of us, Todd McFarlane is busy masterminding a toy empire—one that has just expanded to include figures based on Namco's *Soul Calibur II*, the fighting game featuring McFarlane's mega-hit poster boy Spawn as a playable character on Xbox. The line includes five 4-inch figures, each with a custom base and background: Voldo (with two blade weapons), Nightmare (with a demonic appendage and sword), Astaroth (with a massive battle ax), Ivy (with sword and armor), and Necrid, a new character McFarlane designed for inclusion in the game who sports a three-pronged claw. For the price, the detailing on these things isn't too shabby. Check 'em out everywhere.

03 Namco TV Games

Manufacturer: Jakks-Pacific
www.jakksacific.com
Price: \$20

Jakks-Pacific has done it again, this time cramming five classic Namco arcade games into one cool package. Though the Namco TV Games controller is rather flimsy and awkward in design (it's shaped like an arcade console's front panel and sports a knobbed joystick), you can't deny the product's inherent excellence. The unit plugs into your TV set via A/V inputs, requires four AA batteries, and contains the classic arcade games *Pac-Man*, *Dig Dug*, *Galaxian*, *Rally-X*, and *Bosconian*. *Pac-Man*, *Galaxian*, and *Dig Dug*, of course, need no further explanation; they were classics in the 1980s and hold up remarkably well because they're just so damn fun. *Rally-X* and *Bosconian*, a car-racing game and shooter respectively, are more obscure, but no less excellent than their compatriots. In short, everything old school is new school again. And that's cool.

04 Corporate Fallout Detector

Manufacturer: James Patten
http://web.media.mit.edu/~jpatten/cfd/
Price: N/A

Tired of corporate lies and environmental irresponsibility? With the Corporate Fallout Detector, consumers can now make informed purchasing decisions. Created by James Patten, a Ph.D. candidate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the Detector reads barcodes off everyday consumer products and makes a sound similar to that of a Geiger counter, based on the manufacturer's social and environmental records. "I came up with the numbers by correlating several online barcode databases with a pollution database and a corporate ethics database," says Patten. "Of course, the data produced by this approach is subjective and inaccurate at times, but that's part of why I built it: It's difficult for consumers to trace actions through the maze of corporate ownership to find who is really responsible." A must-have for every *Xbox Nation* reader.

05 Eclipse Wireless Controller

Manufacturer: Pelican Accessories
www.pelicanacc.com
Price: \$40

Look on the Eclipse Wireless Controller, ye Mighty, and be joyous! This silver-hued piece of technological goodness clocks in at \$40, but lets you play Xbox games without wires and from a distance of 50 or so feet—including over such obstacles as the cubicle walls of *Xbox Nation's* compact, dehumanizing offices. Designwise, the controller is a little squat, but, surprisingly, it's not heavy at all. Pelican has even done a neat bit of engineering, putting a second set of black-and-white gameplay buttons right above the right and left analog triggers. The result is quick and easy access and an improvement over the original Xbox controller's layout. The controller's receiver plugs into the Xbox, has four separate channels, and can accommodate two memory cards. Combined with well-tuned analog sticks and comfy rubber handgrips, these features make the Eclipse a delight to use.

SPIN

Things that go round and round

In a far-off land, where the grass is brown and all beings lack opposable thumbs, there exists such forms of entertainment as "music" and "movies." See below.



A Grape Dope Missing Dragons EP

When the man isn't drumming, hammering on vibraphones, playing keyboards and guitar, sweating up a storm, egging on the audience, and generally being the goof that his band Tortoise desperately needs, Johnny Herdon concocts dirty, digital beats and liquescent melodies in his latest solo endeavor, *A Grape Dope*. Covering the breadth of modern electronica with songs featuring vocal cutups, this standout debut release is the perfect showcase for a man whose immense talent is limited only by his musical attention span.

Che Chau



Breakin' MGM Home Entertainment

When *Breakin'* was released in 1984, it was amid a mass of breakdancing paraphernalia invading all aspects of the suburban mall: from Mervyn's selling two-toned parachute pants and zipper shirts to Waldenbooks offering up the New York City Breakers' tips on all things to do with popping and locking, and how to rock a smooth continuation and maybe end it with a finger-snap. The movie was so popular that anyone in attendance was likely to witness some showdowns in line or in the aisles as the movie's credits rolled.

Truth be told, the movie was never any good. If

Beat Street is the *Godfather* of breakdancing films, *Breakin'* is Michael Cimino's flimsy retread, *The Sicilian*. Needless to say, it's all about the dancing. It's really hard not to fall under the charms of Boogaloo Shrimp as he dances around his broom to Kraftwerk's "Tour De France." Shabba-Doo is no joke, either—the man was truly born to lock. Together, they put together dance sequences that are flashy, ridiculous, and enthralling. Another note: There are probably more bandanas in this film than in all the films in history combined.

Jon Pruett



Madlib Shades of Blue

Enough with the grumbling already! This is not Madlib saving jazz, this is his interpretation of the genre. He knows what jazz is and its sacred value. Producers often make a huge mistake by trying to be too fancy with their music, but Madlib keeps it simple and lets the tracks speak for themselves. Check out "Song for My Father." You'll hear the man riff, but the rest is Madlib doing what he does best. This is an honest CD done by a man who keeps all of jazz's integrity while making sure the head nodders are guaranteed a sore neck.

Carlo Bacor



Comic Book Confidential Home Vision

Someday, when the space aliens sift through the charred remains of American civilization, they're going to encounter several recurring themes: sex, violence, and, of course, Batman. Yes, dear reader, our nation was founded on the backs of costumed superheroes.

The history of the comic art form, however, is widely overlooked, filed somewhere in the library between the slang dictionary and the books on tape. Nonetheless, *Comic Book Confidential* is a fascinating tale, filled with colorful characters and titillating twists of fate. The film does a good job of covering

the gamut with style, featuring plenty of amazing art and candid one-on-one interviews with most of comicdom's heaviest hitters, including Stan Lee, Will Eisner, R. Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Frank Miller. The film gives equal time to the underground comics scene too, and doesn't shy away from controversial topics. You even get to see Mickey and Minnie...uh...doing it. Even though the movie's a little musty, having been produced in 1989, it's worth a peep for anybody who's ever wanted to draw, write, or understand comics.

Matt Sammons



Futurama Vol. 2 Twentieth Century Fox Home Video

In *Futurama's* second season, the animated show found its legs and began to use them to kick serious ass. It was here that dim-witted bottom-feeder from the 20th century Phillip J. Fry and his pals from the Planet Express traveled to the Slurm factory to hear the faux Oompah Loompahs—the Grunka Lunkas—croon, “Grunka lunka dunkety dasis, the secret of Slurm’s on a need-to-know basis!” and where, ultimately, it was discovered the world’s most addictive drink came from a space slug’s ass. It would be here that paper-pusher Hermes would requisition his groove back, singing “The Bureaucrat Song” and

space hero Zapp Branigan (who crushed the pacifists of the Ghandi Nebula) got court-martialed for blowing up the headquarters of the Democratic Order of Planets. *Futurama Vol. 2* packages 20 episodes on four discs with commentaries, deleted scenes, animatics, Easter Eggs, and lots of artwork. It is, possibly, the best and most succinct way to tell someone you love them, aside from actually using the words “I love you.” It is also, undoubtedly, a sad reminder the show has been canceled to make room for junk, crap, and, oh yes, garbage.

Greg Orlando



Bad Company Wellspring

Much like *Kids*, *Bad Company* is a film that will scare parents and the Christian right alike into locking up their daughters well into their mid-30s. Directed by Jean-Pierre Améris, *Bad Company* resembles an episode of *My So-Called Life* gone horribly awry. When 14-year-old Delphine (Maud Forget) says she will do anything for love, mark her words, she will do anything. Delphine’s first week of high school is full of fast changes when she befriends Olivia (Lou Doillon), the overdeveloped, sexually experienced new girl and falls mercilessly in love with the wrong boy. Indeed Delphine is given no mercy in the film and is subject

to some very terrible things.

Bad Company is more tasteful, better acted, and has less gratuitous shock value than *Kids*, yet has moments that are far more painful (think salt on wounds) than the seminal Chloë Sevigny HIV-contracting scene. With its banal pop-music credits and ’70s film aesthetic, *Company* may start off like an after-school special but takes some hairpin turns, not unlike a Lars Von Trier fingernail-pulling session, to become something disturbing and fascinating at the same time. Not for the squeamish.

Raina Lee



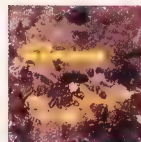
The Experiment Columbia TriStar

Sadism, abuses of power, rebellion: all inherently a part of human nature, as demonstrated by *The Experiment*, a German film loosely based on the events of the infamous Stanford Prison Experiment. The film is a fictionalized account of the guards and prisoners and their descent into madness and cruelty. While the Stanford experiment had to be stopped prematurely when the “guards” became overly sadistic, *The Experiment* is a stylized version of what may have happened if the authorities had never intervened.

Moritz Bleibtreu of *Run Lola Run* plays an undercover journalist looking to revive his career with the

ultimate scoop and volunteers to be a guinea pig in a mysterious social experiment. As a prisoner, he is stripped, hosed, and given a number. While the experiment starts off with schoolyard banter and light punishments, the tension escalates quickly and becomes a war of prisoners against guards, and a race for survival. While predictable—you know it will end badly and without redemption—*The Experiment* is mesmerizing in a train-wreck sort of way. Strange, disorienting, and unflinchingly real, *The Experiment* is also a well-executed exercise in extreme role-playing.

Raina Lee



Mu-Ziq Bilious Paths

It’s fascinating to watch Mike Paradinas (aka µ-Ziq) work the crowd behind his fluorescent Powerbook. Despite his obvious nervous energy, Paradinas remains awkwardly impervious to the rolling, spastic beats spitting out of the club PA. *Bilious Paths* presents the listener with a pastiche of audio experimentation, moving effortlessly from madcap jungle beats to down-tempo melodies. Unlike his classic album *Lunatic Harness* (1997), *Paths* is more challenging, esoteric, and subsequently, also more rewarding.

Che Chuu



Nina Nastasia Run to Ruin

Run to Ruin is a collection of slow, heavy, well-orchestrated songs in the vein of Tom Waits. Nastasia sings poetic lyrics over keys, strings, bass, guitars, and sparse but powerful drums that hold the often loose band together. Songs meander and swell like some deranged carnival orchestra fronted by a powerful female vocalist who can’t decide if she wants to tame the lions or let them devour her. Think of an indie-folk symphony produced by Steve Albini and you’ll have a good idea of what *Ruin* sounds like.

Nate Denver



Super Furry Animals Phantom Power

Super Furry Animals came to light in 1996, right at the tail end of BritPop, offering up a bit of Welsh whimsy and psychedelia. Six albums in and the group remains undiminished, pushing its hybrid of electronics, mile-high pop, and whatever else, out into the mystic. *Phantom Power* finds the Animals toning it down a little, rambling through the haze with fistfuls of shining pop light. The result is an effortlessly strange mixture of Technicolor melody and sun-bleached yearning that’s good to listen to.

Jon Pruett



INBOX

XBN@ziffdavis.com



Last Issue...

Millions of trees died so we could bring you the behemoth that was *Xbox Nation* #009. Rest assured, they went happy into the wood chipper, knowing their pulp would indeed become the "Let's Talk About Our Feelings" issue. For you weak-minded fools who've yet to jump on the bandwagon and go in for the big win, *XBN* took an in-depth look at Ubi Soft's spectacular adventure *Prince of Persia*, as well as THQ's fine military simulation *Full Spectrum Warrior*. There were also previews aplenty to sample for games such as *Alias*, *Breakdown*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Drake*, all the way down to *Wallace and Gromit*; reviews for *Brute Force*, *Midnight Club II*, *Big Mutha Truckers*, *Evil Dead: Fistful of Boomstick* ("it's a fistful of something," our critic noted), and the most furiously named game of all time, *Furious Karting*. There was news to savor; fun interviews with Nile Rodgers, Todd McFarlane, and David "Shiny" Perry; and just about the maximum number of obscure references to absolutely nothing we could, by law, shove into the issue.

I was looking through the Feb/March (#006) issue of your fine magazine when I stumbled upon something that interested me greatly. On page 107, the Outbox's first comment: "I think this is the first time in recorded history a magazine has come with a comic book and a vomit bag." If my memory serves me correctly, the two games being advertised are *Batman: Dark Tomorrow* and *Superman: Man of Steel*, respectively. If my memory also again fulfills its purpose, you and several other publications rated these two games below average. Which got me wondering: Do developers know that their game is going to be video feces and must resort to flashy advertising and quirky gimmicks to get the consumer to buy their product? Is this what our great industry has turned to?

If I pick up the next issue of your magazine, may I find a large green plastic army man strapped to it? A bottle of brightly colored pills promoting the next *Matrix* game? A "shudder" fully poseable Fatalist action figure? Don't get me wrong, I'm all for creative ways to bolster your product, it's just that promoting your hard work with an air-sickness bag, may be conveying the wrong message to the consumers.

Nail Orr

Look for random parrot chunks to promote *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

In regards to the recent *Xbox Nation* "Gamepad" column on gun violence: *Bowling for Columbine* typifies the tactics that will be used on the gaming industry. Although the movie is promoted as a true documentary, there are lies and mixed video clips (joining two separate

statements/events at different times to make them seem as one) to "prove" the director's anti-gun lies. Quoting bogus statistics from this film just shows how easily suckered the American public is.

Why do I mention this at all? Because the same techniques are already being used against videogames. In the nightly news on TV, you have the same *National Enquirer*-style reporting. The media shows *Grand Theft Auto* violence, mention that you can beat and kill cops and rape prostitutes, implies that all violent videogames are like that, right before it goes to a story pushing a law for banning violent videogames.

Be careful about the media. Big Brother lives in the media.
Ken Yee

Actually, Big Brother lives in our closet and we feed him Saltines. Oh, and Jason Brookes, the column's writer, has this to say:

Whatever tactics Michael Moore used as journalistic leverage, it's hard to ignore the fact that America has an extraordinarily high number of gun deaths per year. The pro-gun lobbyists might cling to their defense that guns don't kill people, people do, but anyone with half a brain knows that both guns and people kill; guns just make it easier. And so we live in a country that's statistically a more dangerous

place than most other developed nations. This is hardly a picture fabricated by anti-gun lies.

While the film's handling of videogames wasn't exactly elegant, it's a bit much to equate Moore's agenda with the sensationalist, big brother propaganda of TV news

channels such as Fox News. Sure, videogames have been unfairly targeted in the past, just in the same way that comics and movies were once blamed for the disintegration of cultural values. But the article was intended to point out the impunity the videogames industry has long relied on, can't last. As violent experiences border on reality, and as our immersion in those worlds becomes more seamless with new display technologies, we simply do not know what effects such "real" experiences will have on people. Ultimately, we're learning as we go with this one, but if the videogames industry continues to move forward via an agenda of realistic, explicit violence, the moral responsibilities that go with that simply can't be ignored.

In *XBN* #009, there was a *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* preview. In the game info section at the beginning of the preview article, you said something about killing "evil Japs." From what I have learned, "Jap" is a racist term, as it was used negatively to Japanese during World War II. I am Chinese-American, but I do not think you should use that term as I wouldn't want any racist term to be used against me or any other groups of people.
Curtis Eng
Seattle, WA

In the same vein that you find the term "Jap" to be offensive, some of us at *Xbox Nation* find military games that treat the complex nature of war with the fire-and-forget recklessness of an arcade shooter to be equally as offensive. It used to be that war-themed blast-a-thons only hinted at the nature of its politics by using approximations of real-life "enemies" (see Konami's 1985 Cold War classic *Rush'n Attack*, a delicious pun on "Russian Attack"). With mili-

Be careful about the media. Big Brother lives in the media.

—Ken Yee

tary shooters and graphical realism currently in vogue, developers should treat such real-life matters with care and respect. That said, even if it was simply to make a point, we apologize for using such a heinous slur.

Can you guys do me a favor? Using your vast connections, can you let the developers of *Fable* know that they should include the custom soundtrack option in the game. I know it seems like certain games need the soundtrack to create atmosphere, but I'd like to create my own. Imagine questing through an epic RPG's vast terrains while listening to a Led Zeppelin song and smoking from a hookah. Think of the possibilities. Every game should have a custom soundtrack option.

Feel free to edit the hookah comment. Did I spell that right? (Also, I'm sure that you guys know that many of Zeppelin's songs have mystical Celtic and hobbit references right?)
Rudy Stains

We had intended to use our vast connections to procure 1,325 slightly soggy bootleg DVD copies of *When Justin Met Kelly*. Instead, we used our powers for good, and had Simon Carter, lead programmer for Big Blue Box Studios Ltd. (and the Studio's co-founder) answer your question. Carter speaks thusly:

Hi Rudy, thanks for the e-mail. Like you, I'm always keen to set my own atmosphere in games; I have happy memories of running around the mazes of *Dungeon Master* to the minimalist tones of

The Art of Noise, and leveling up my Avatar in the *Ultima* games with Kate Bush in the background.

Having said that, the music in *Fable* is an integral part of the experience—the soundtrack adapts to the situation you're in and the way you've been playing the game. We've put in a lot of work to make the music immerse you in the world of Albion, and we're very reticent to have people lose that extra layer of involvement and atmosphere with the game. Imagine watching *Psycho* while listening to a soundtrack written by 2 Unlimited—certain key scenes would rather lose their impact.

However, all is not lost. One thing we have been thinking about is allowing the player to customize the music elsewhere in the game. For example, there's a pub in Bowerstone where you can get the jukebox to play anything you have on your Xbox hard disk. We've even been playing with the idea of having the people of the towns react somehow to the music that's being played. So, who knows? Slap on Led Zeppelin and the population of Bowerstone may join you in a pint.

Please go monthly. I love your wit and humor.
Tom Clark
Springfield, MO

Sorry, Tom. The comedy chimps only have enough flatulent humor and bad puns for bimonthly publication, and they'd turn upon their human masters if we tried to push them harder.



When not choking down Quaaludes, members of Led Zeppelin spent their spare time coming up with hobbit references.

Maybe someday, XBN will indeed go monthly. In the words of the Mighty, Mighty Bosstones, "Someday, I suppose. Someday, who knows?"

I have been meaning to write an ass-kissing letter. Good job on the mag, love your sense of humor and the "maturity" of the magazine (or lack thereof, but still appealing to a mature audience, if that makes sense?) Anyway, people have also bashed your design in the magazine, that's silly nonsense.

I want to commend your graphic designers/trained chimps, or whatever you employ on their great sense of design, some of the best covers I've seen in a long while.
Troy Moorden

Actually, we employ the Covertron 5250 to make our covers. It's a distant cousin of the Reviewatron 6370 and the Editron 4340. They're handy tools, especially because the lumpy, mishapen troglodytes passing for editors here don't particularly like to, um, work.

Outbox

Thus spake the people... representatives of the people

"I told them their motivation was to go straight to the actors and kill them."

"I thought it was funny...but no."

"How a man plays a game shows something of his character. How he loses shows all of it."

"Maybe she'd like 'H.W.C.'"

"Gotham City is in trouble. Call for Batman!"

"Did they run these screenshots through someone's ass?"

"Actually, by the time the novel was given the green light, I only had seven weeks to write it!"

Mail of the moment

When good questions inspire bad answers

Before the Music Mixer came out, I logged a lot of time ripping and naming custom tunes to my Xbox. I want to know if there will be a way to transfer my tunes to Xbox 2 when it is released since the soundtracks on the hard drive can't be copied?

Dewayne Boland
Bronx, NY

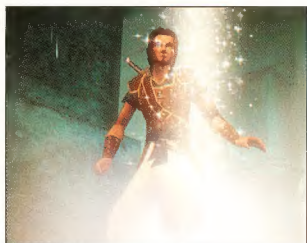
The verbose Magic 8-Ball says there will almost certainly be some way to upload Xbox files onto a PC and then download them to an Xbox 2, but this is purely speculation as Microsoft has not made public any of its plans for a new console. It also predicts you will be eaten by a large insect.



According to "dope" peepz at Microsoft, Music Mixer is phat. And that's not whack. ("Shudder")

EXIT

Next time in Xbox Nation



Massive holiday review roundup

Reviews of every Xbox holiday release: *Prince of Persia*, *Counter-Strike*, *NBA Live 2004*, *ESPN NBA 2004*, *Sega GT Online*, *The Sims*, *Ninja Out*, *Tony Hawk's Underground*, *Ninja Gaiden*, *SSX 3*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *Crimson Skies*, *Top Spin*, *Project Gotham Racing 2*, and *XIII*.



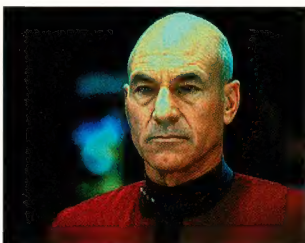
First-person madness

Halo 2, *Half-Life 2*, *DOOM 3*, *Unreal 2*. XBN digs deep to answer the many lingering questions behind Xbox's biggest titles, and uncovers some extremely interesting results in this whopping investigation. Miss it only at your peril.



The people who matter

Konami's Hideo Kojima, hip-hop legend Del the Funky Homosapien, Team Ninja's Tomonobu Itagaki, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles co-creators Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird, and perhaps even Joan of Arc.



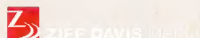
Xbox, The Next Generation

Xbox Nation enlists the help of the game industry's best and brightest minds, asking them to take a crack at designing Microsoft's next videogame console. Take a sneak peek into Xbox's future if it were crafted directly by the people who make its games.



Live from Tokyo

XBN travels across the Pacific on its biodiesel-powered raft to uncover the single biggest mystery of the East: the Tokyo Game Show. Can Xbox finally make its presence felt in the Land of the Rising National Debt?



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